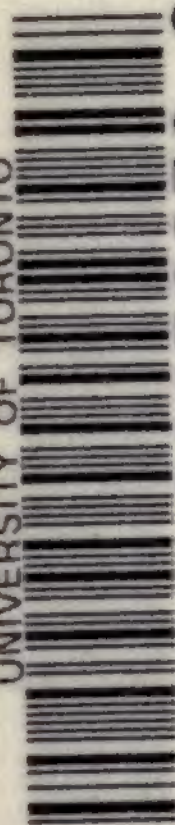


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NETS FOR THE WIND

BY

UNA TAYLOR





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NETS FOR THE WIND





NETS FOR THE WIND

BY UNA TAYLOR

BOSTON: ROBERTS BROS., 1896

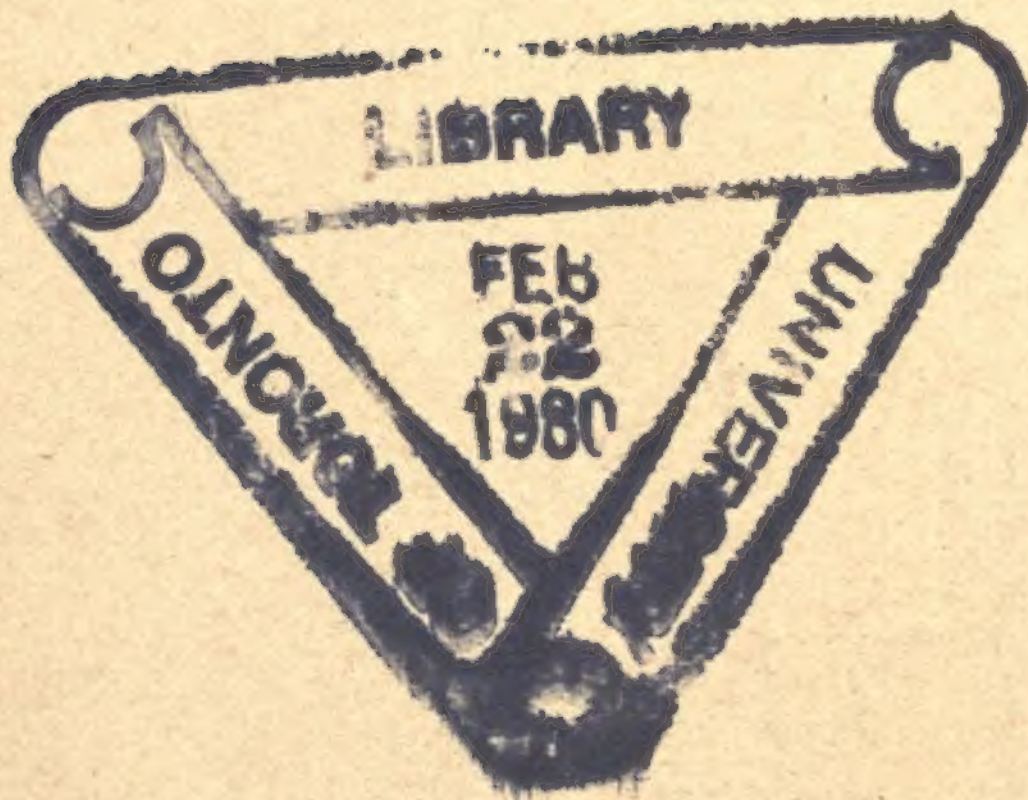
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TO
C. E. H.

*There are ideal trains of events which
run parallel with the real ones.*

NOVALIS.

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I

NETS FOR THE WIND

THE intermingled twilights of day and night, the blue dusk of night unended and day unbegun, filled the blank spaces of the lancet windows of a high octagonal room. The spiral flames of the lamps, suspended in the window's oriel, rose in yellow translucence against the grayness of the midnight hours, the tessellated floor gave back their glimmering reflections. The shadows of the living figures which moved to and fro in that sequestered chamber fell on the dead images of the frescoed wall. All of that small company, save one, a slumbering boy, were watchers. They spoke in the lowered tones of languid expectancy.

‘On just such a night he left us.’

The plaintive monotone of a girl's voice broke the silent lassitude of the summer night.

‘And none knew whither he went nor wherefore!’

The light fell on her hair, changing its fairness to silver, her eyelids drooped drowsily over the faint blue eyes.

A dice-player let fall the ivory discs upon the marble floor, the veins of his hands were knotted like cords, his face was bronzed, his eyes changeful and sombre as a winter sea.

‘Not even Hesper?’ he asked.

A woman beside him spoke with a whisper of laughter in her accents.

‘Nor I, nor Christa, nor any, Sylvanus, might know what road Joel took.’

‘Nor wherefore he went?’ pursued the dice-player.

She was silent.

‘Joel will return to-night, Hesper,’ the girl who had spoken first reiterated. ‘He said he would return to-night; he will not fail of his promise.’

The woman she addressed rose. She stepped from the window onto the broad stone balcony without. It overlooked a wide garden, with squares of lawn and ambuscades of cypress, whose topmost spires fringed the white walls of

a sleeping city. The city roofs sloped downwards to a level plain of corn and maize fields, and the plain was bounded by the sea.

Not a fleece of cloud obscured the star-tinselled sky, a white-gold moon-sickle faded upon an amethyst horizon. The night itself seemed a watcher for the dawn.

‘The stars are like ghosts,’ the woman called Hesper murmured. Then she forgot the stars. ‘He will not come,’ she said.

Her arm was whiter than the stone on which it lay. A fugitive flush of faintest scarlet tinged the rounded oval of her face. The deep short curve of her lips bore no suggestion of weariness, her feet touched the ground as if impatient of repose; in the varied rust colors of her hair the emeralds, burning with the fire of their own hearts, accentuated the kindred vitality of the woman who wore them.

The dice-player had followed her.

‘How beautiful you are, Hesper!’ he said.

She looked at him mockingly; her eyes were dead as the dusk itself, their color was the color of rain-wet dust. They were a discord in her face.

He laughed as he looked.

‘I know them,’ he said. ‘Your beauty, Hesper, is an accident, not a design. Your hair is harvest, your voice spring, your lips June’s heart-blood, your eyes dead as the year’s December.’

She made no reply. He went on.

‘Your every feature is a contradiction, yet—you are beautiful.’

‘By what “accident”?’ she quoted jesting.

‘By the accident of life; it has transmuted your discords to harmony.’

‘And death?’ she questioned.

‘Will reveal them,’ he answered.

‘Wish me long life,’ she cried. Then, pointing within, ‘Tell me, Sylvanus the painter, does Christa also owe her beauty to life?’

‘Not to life—she has not yet reached life—and when she reaches it that which is your concord will be her dissonance.’

He broke off.

‘Will you give me,’ he demanded, ‘your lips and your brows and the little red snakes you call your hair, and the white fingers which change clay to flame, for the lips and the hands and the hair of my Lady of Love?’

‘I will give them,’ she assented.

‘Is it a promise?’ he asked quickly.

‘Or a threat?’ she replied.

‘Whichever it be I claim its fulfilment,’ the painter answered.

She did not hear his words. A step passed on the pavement of a distant street; the air was so still each footfall was audible. Over her face the pallor of a heart-sick hope swept its wave of whiteness.

Could it be that she loved Joel? Sylvanus questioned. He came nearer. The footsteps died away; she hid her face. A gleam of half-derisive pity crossed the man’s dark features. He had taken her secret by surprise.

The cadence of a broken melody, the undertone of voices from within, drifted out into the night.

Hesper lifted her head, and spoke.

‘Listen, Sylvanus, to you I will tell all; to you alone of all the world I will speak. I who suffer, to you who mock.’

For a moment she waited, then proceeded rapidly.

‘To the convent where I had dwelt from childhood Joel came. They told me I was to be his wife. He sought me in the garden

where the red lilies grow for martyrs' festivals. He came to me, and he kissed me. Life holds all hours, but there is one hour holds all life. When Joel was gone I could not feel the sunshine on my hands where he had kissed them. I could not feel the wind on my face where his lips had touched it. I lay in the grass, but I could not feel its soft blades against my mouth. I kissed the earth, for I loved it, but it could not kiss me again; his kisses were between me and it, between me and the sun and the wind and the leaves.'

'I said of your voice, "It is spring,"' Sylvanus murmured. 'It is not — for can the heart of spring break?'

She paid no heed.

'None knew, save I alone, that my life was on fire, — nor Joel, nor my companions, nor God. I did not tell them. How should I tell them that if I laid my hand on the marble it would scorch the marble, that if I stood in the night it would be robbed of its darkness? I shunned them all, even Joel; life had brought me a new fellowship, a terror, and a joy, — it was my own human nature which had come to me, and I did not know if it were a devil or a god. In

those days I wakened to the wakefulness which knows sleep no more, to the life of which a little greater measure slays.'

Sylvanus heard — he understood.

'Do not wed him,' he said, 'for you love him, and your love will slay his worship; he worships a dream, and you, Hesper, are a woman.'

She flushed and shrank.

'I know it — but I will hide it from him,' she cried.

'You cannot. Your love will sign its red letters upon your very hands,' he answered her. 'Hesper, your heart has missed its mark; for you his hands are empty of blessing.'

'I will change his worship into love,' she exclaimed vehemently. 'Am I not beautiful? Or I will find a soul, — the soul of love he worships.'

Sylvanus laughed under his breath.

'As well might the sun crave for sight of the moonlit earth as a woman such as you for love's soul,' he replied mercilessly.

She felt his contempt through the thin veil of his pity.

'Love,' she said, 'what does a man know of a woman's love, — the love they claim from us that they may tread it in the dust beneath their

fect! You see our tears and our laughter, checkered each with either. We jest with grief and weep with mirth, and you deride our tears and our laughter. But learn this, Sylvanus: under the tears and under the laughter, one of two things dwells forever in a woman's heart — a love, or a hate. And I, believe or believe it not as you will, love him so greatly that if he loved me I should love him less.'

'Where is your pride to love unloved?' he scoffed.

Her face flashed into scorn.

'Pride?' she echoed. 'Is that pride, to love for love's wages, coin for coin, measure for measure? My pride is another. It is to spend all and purchase nothing, to lose all and retrieve no one of all its losses, to hazard life on a game where the dice are loaded. Love's pride, Sylvanus, is to give.'

The swift tide of her words died.

'My God, I love Thee, not because
I hope for heaven thereby.'

The passionate old hymn of scourge and cord rose to her lips. The painter caught the sentence. Pity and contempt died within him,

anger supplanted them. By what invasion of the soul's prerogative dared this woman of earth arrogate to herself the language of love divine ! Then the anger, too, faded.

‘Is there,’ he questioned, ‘is there in dust — God?’

From within voices were calling, ‘Hesper, Hesper, come!’

‘I come,’ she answered.

But once more her eyes searched the night. Once more she listened with a hushed intensity, which infected Sylvanus till he listened with her, — listened, but all was still.

A white-winged moth flew past; they could feel the fan of its wings upon the air; it returned again, scorched and maimed; the lamp within had singed it; it fluttered against Hesper's face, and fell. She started.

‘It touched me,’ she cried.

‘But its wings were burnt before,’ he laughed, lifting it.

She turned away; they re-entered the room together.

The scene had changed. Outspread upon a table was a pack of strangely tinted cards; each bore an image, each image was a symbol.

There Wisdom carried her torch, here Courage closed the lion's mouth, Victory was crowned with planets, the Sphinx sat upon Fortune's wheel. On one, Man — the Flesh — wanders a fool in passion's tatters; on another, Man — the Mind — is cast headlong from the House of Life; while Man — the Heart — blind and bleeding, stands midway between love's body and love's soul, a god to reign or a slave to serve. Destiny, God, Man, each are there portrayed, and Death, life's thirteenth apostle, reaps his harvest with crooked sceptre, the heads and hands of kings.

‘Draw, Hesper,’ they cried at her approach.
‘See, the cards of destiny.’

Sylvanus took the pack; he counted it. ‘One is missing, — the card of fate.’

‘That Joel drew, a year ago,’ the card-dealer said. ‘Fate keeps no duplicates.’

‘What said Joel?’ some one asked.

‘He said, “Destiny is the wind the soul's ship sails against,” ’ she answered.

‘I will choose, and my soul shall sail with the wind,’ Sylvanus said.

‘“Choose!” ’ the card-dealer echoed, jeering.
‘It is not we who choose fate, it is fate who has chosen us.’

He had drawn a card from the pack. 'She must be strong if she justify her choice,' he mocked, regarding it.

'Keep silence,' she said, 'the game is yet to play.'

He lifted the card to a lamp-flame, it shrivelled, he trod its ashes underfoot. 'So fate will tread upon your life,' the card-dealer said.

'Christa has drawn,' cried one of the bystanders.

'She has no need to fear fate; heaven's certificate is on her face,' said another.

'You have the eyes of a mystic, but the mouth of a woman,' Sylvanus whispered in the girl's ear.

Her gay serenity was overcast; she covered her card with her small fingers.

'It is only a play,' she protested fearfully.

Hesper's hand was outstretched. The very hues of life vibrated in the scarlet rose-color of her cheek and lips, and in the vivid blue veins which threaded her temples and the inner curve of her arm.

'She has drawn,' some one said.

'Who entered the door?' The sleeping boy had wakened suddenly; it was he who spoke,

and speaking, he relapsed into the slumber from which he had started.

Sylvanus's eyes had never quitted Hesper; she thrust the card beneath her dress.

'Fate haply entered to seek her own,' the painter murmured.

Hastily he sorted the cards dropped from the dealer's hands.

'We have chosen well,' he said. 'Four cards are lacking. Joel holds blind destiny. To us are fallen the lots of life and of death, and the card which is God's.'

'It is ill-done,' interposed a man who had not before spoken. 'When we extort an answer from Fate we become her accomplice. We build up the image of our doom within our mind, and call, henceforth, fate necessity.'

Sylvanus would have replied, but with a gesture Hesper silenced him. Her eyes were transformed with the shock of a great joy.

In the door stood the figure of a man. Joel was come.

.

The vigil of that little company was over. All was still in the house, of which Joel was master; sleep had come to those who had

wakened, and waking had not yet come to those who had slept.

Hesper and Joel were at length alone in the deserted room, but in the intensity of that daybreak stillness it seemed to her that the silence itself made a third, — it was like a presence.

Joel held the narrow palm of her right hand in his, her heart beat, the veins of her temples throbbed, and the bright vermilion surged across her cheek. Her whole life sprang to meet the greeting homage of his lips. Then, with a supreme recoil of terror, her will severed the living tide from its heart-fountain, and her hand lay in his, passive, inert, and dead.

‘I have come back, Hesper,’ he said; ‘you sent me from you and I went. What is the reward of my service, — dream of my dream?’

‘Dear heart,’ he pleaded, ‘have you learnt to love me a little? What will you give in exchange for my love?’

At the sound of his entreaty, at the tenderness of his caress, she fell into the ambush hope lays forever for a woman’s heart.

‘Is it your heart’s love, indeed, you bring me?’ She searched his face with urgent questioning.

‘My heart’s love, not so! I bring a greater gift, — my spirit’s worship,’ he cried.

She laid her cheek supplicatingly upon his hand.

‘But what if I ask the lesser gift? Not the white altar lily, but earth’s reddest rose?’ she whispered.

Would not her beauty even now suffice to change his worship into love, — the love which should answer to her love? He laughed softly, but his face was steel.

‘You do not know of what you speak,’ he said. ‘Those roses scorch the hand that gives and the hand that takes.’ Then he had forgotten her words — his answer.

‘Ah, sweet heart,’ he said, ‘you will not exile me again, my white star; God has enough lovers to spare you to me. Love me a little.’ So the man, in his blindness, asked his pittance from the woman whose all lay at his feet.

In the slow nativity of the dawn Hesper covered her lips from his sight. The bondage of her will still held her, but its iron was scarring the flesh with the indenture of its breaking fetters.

‘ Say, Hesper, shall I go or stay? ’

She answered him — ‘ Stay.’

Her voice was a tired whisper.

‘ Then, Hesper, you have learnt to love me.’

He drew her hands from her lips.

‘ Joel,’ she cried vehemently, ‘ I cannot live without you.’

She read the wonder of his eyes, then he stooped to kiss her; it was as if to ask forgiveness for some thought that did her wrong.

‘ Your words,’ he said, ‘ are but echoes of a life of which your soul’s whiteness has never crossed the outermost threshold.’

‘ But life comes to all, as certainly as death,’ she cried.

‘ Yes, Hesper,’ he assented quickly, but she felt the edge of a hidden disquiet through his tenderness. ‘ But having learnt so much, learn also more. That life of which you ignorantly speak is bitter and blind as death, and the terror of death before it is as nothing to the terror of life. It is lonely as the grave. Ask those who know. They stand in a solitude of night, severed from all, bound in a bondage death’s self cannot unloose. That life has no speech in which to utter itself, its griefs are without tears;

from its wounds no blood-drops flow. Know this and no more. Even knowledge has its stain.'

'Yet it may come,' Hesper expostulated brokenly; 'and who may know —'

He broke in upon her faltering sentence.

'Know! Who may know it? It is as death to the dead, as darkness to the night, as flame to the fire —'

'But beyond it?' she pleaded.

'Who has come back to tell?' he said slowly. 'Of men but few, of women none. Can a man ungraft the thorn whose sap runs in the root of the vine?'

'Yet passions, like griefs, are worn out,' she urged, — 'worn out with years.'

'Not so — they are worn in,' he answered. 'But what is this to you?' He drew her once more to him. 'Hesper, say, when shall I ask no more gifts of your grace because that in one gift all gifts shall be mine? When — Hesper — when?'

Her hands burnt, the earth fell from her feet; she would have broken from his hold, but he held her close, striving to soothe her terror with the touch of his kisses upon her hair.

Then life wrenched itself from its long subjection to her will, the chain of its captivity fell. She raised her head, her smoke-gray eyes had grown black as night; she lifted her arms, and with locked fingers clung to him; a low cry escaped her,—the cry of despair.

‘What would you say? I cannot hear your words,’ Joel said. ‘Hesper, what are your lips saying?’

In his eyes she read the intensity of his recoil—his arms held her no more.

‘I am saying farewell, heart of my heart,’ she said slowly. ‘You loved a vision; and I, Joel, am but a woman. Do you not know that since your arms first held me, there is no other heaven in all God’s heavens for me.’

And around her the silence seemed to repeat her words.

.

Amongst the throng of many colored lives in Joel’s home, the mother of Joel moved in the serene wisdom of the age which is heaven’s anteroom; her fair, strong spirit waiting to discard the frail tenement of its outworn humanity. To Hesper, since the night of Joel’s home-coming, she had spoken but once con-

cerning him. As Sylvanus before, so also did she speak.

‘Do not wed him, for you love him.’

They stood in the outer court of the palace chapel, where a life-size Calvary was wrought into the massive wall. The narrow spears of the early morning light streaked the worn pavement between shadow and shadow.

‘I will wait,’ Hesper answered.

‘Poor child — how long?’ The face of Joel’s mother was his face, but his was the coldness of the stone no fire penetrates; hers the coldness of the ashes when the fire has passed.

‘Till I have found love’s soul, — the soul he seeks,’ Hesper replied.

She would bare her feet to the flints, bruise her hands on the rock, would follow the stations of love’s cross, consecrate the clay, and anoint the dust of earth with the royalty of suffering. So she told herself; and yet, every rift in her hope let in the darkness of despair.

‘Where will you seek it?’ asked the other compassionately.

‘Where!’ Hesper stretched her upbraiding hands towards the silent stone Figure.

‘Is it nothing to you, O God?’ she cried.

‘Is it nothing to you that you pass by? Behold and see, is there any sorrow like unto my sorrow? Is it nothing, nothing, nothing, to you? With His sorrow,’ she said, in bitter arraignment, ‘I, even I, a sinner, have grieved; with His tears I have wept. But with mine—’ She broke off vehemently.

‘O pitiless answer of a pitiless God, “There shall no sign be given them,”’ she exclaimed.

‘Joel also suffers,’ said his mother.

‘Can marble bleed?’ asked Hesper, turning from her.

.
In the long gallery of the northern wing of the building Sylvanus awaited Hesper’s coming. Day by day she had come to him there; had given him all he asked of her, — her hands and her lips and the delicate modelling of her blue-veined temples — for the hands, the lips, and the brows of his Lady of Love. Only in place of her eyes, he had painted the sea-blue eyes, with their tearless laughter, of the Mother of Joy.

Hesper was beautiful; that fair woman who was fain to send the heart of her love on its vain pilgrimage in quest of love’s soul, and here, on his canvas, his Lady of Love was beautiful

as Hesper. Beneath the outstretched whiteness of her arms, the purple dusk of a rock-bound waste; beneath the poised whiteness of her feet, the green grass blazoned with anemones, red as the wounds of dead Adonis. But the pictured blue of those eyes was scarcely more perfect in his sight than were Hesper's, — which were so dark, and dumb, and gray.

Surely they had grown darker and more dead, he thought, as now she came towards him. They were like smoke when the fire is extinct. How did it fare with her search? Was hope dying by inches? And when hope was dead, what then? Sylvanus was glad of her despair. She was to him a chapter in life's book; he turned the page with mingled curiosity and contempt, and sometimes it might be with an anger stronger and keener than either. Each line of the record was a contradiction; each feeling a dissonance with its fellow; each fretted for mastery, and each was in turn subject to her heart's slightest impulse.

To Hesper, Sylvanus was nothing save the man to whom she had told her secret. It is a relationship which constitutes a bond until it becomes a thralldom.

As now he rose to greet her, his glance fell upon the rosary she carried in her hand. She laid the beads aside with a laugh.

‘They are untold,’ she said, replying to his unspoken derision.

‘I do not doubt it,’ he answered. ‘It is not to Mary your Aves are said.’

Then he added.

‘Why prayer’s semblance where all else of prayer is lacking?’

‘What faith,’ she cried jesting, ‘can surpass the prayer which is bereft of faith? What greater testimony of belief than the worship of the infidel? Give me one prayer of the dark for all the prayers of the day.’

‘You cannot pray, and you do not pray,’ he asserted.

‘It may be — what then?’ she asked.

From the window near which they talked, she pointed downwards to the pointed roof of the palace chapel in the square court below.

‘What if I do not pray? God is there; I go to Him.’

Her levity was gone; the sincerity of her sorrow spoke.

‘A woman’s God — the creation of her need!’ Sylvanus responded.

Hesper attempted no rejoinder, yet presently she spoke again, following aloud the train of awakening memories.

‘Once to me,’ she said, ‘the altar was my life’s home-land. Its marble and gold were but an unsubstantial transparence through which I viewed the green vistas of heaven, hedged with white lilies, and fringed with roses red as the blood of man, — gardens where laurels grow for victors, and myrtles for the brides of Christ. God was there; and where He is, is paradise.’

‘Paradise is not God’s boundary, if God be God,’ the painter replied contemptuously.

‘True,’ answered the woman; ‘yet in the crowded streets I could not track His feet, so many footsteps are printed in the dust! But in the altar’s tranquillity I found His home-chamber, as my chamber is mine, where the open page, the gathered flower, create, even when I am absent, my presence. And those dead tokens are not dead! Is anything dead? The very stones of my ring have taken something of my life into them — what has touched life, lives. The rose I kissed is other than the

unkissed rose that withers; some fraction of me lives in its blossom, dies in its death.'

'What know you of death?' Sylvanus questioned scoffing. 'It has never laid one finger's-weight on you, except,' — he looked for a moment into her eyes and laughed. 'If Joel kissed your eyes would they come to life?' he asked.

She paid no heed; her mind reverted to those lost visions of her worship.

'Instead of the Crucifix, I saw sorrow; instead of the Crown, joy; instead of the Host, God.'

She paused, wrapped in a passionate regret for shrines where once she had adored.

'So the symbols fade and life's extremest points are found. Nativity in a God's birth, death in a God's dying, — all births of man and woman, of loves, hates, joys, and despairs; all dyings, the extinction of all living things, the obliteration of all that has been, that is, or that ever shall be. Sylvanus, before that infinitude of life and death, the thoughts of the brain die and the thoughts of the heart are born.'

She ceased, her wandering fancy strove to measure the gulfs of those kindred abysses.

'Now it is lost, — ah, lost,' she continued. 'About the altar is a great solitude, and round

it a crowded human company, beadsmen of that shrine, with hands forever outstretched to touch the untouchable, with tears forever falling on those feet which cannot feel those tears.' Her voice softened with a great pity. 'Ah, Sylvanus,' she cried suddenly, 'it must be very lonely to be God.'

He regarded her with angered surprise. What were her lips to take God's name upon them, or his ears that they should listen!

'To whom are you speaking?' he said.

Recalled with sharp transition from the region where the past overmasters the present and memory signs a truce with oblivion, she made swift reply.

'To the man you will be,' she answered.

He laughed aloud.

'And you spoke from your past to my future, you, the woman that was, to the man who is yet to be.'

'Your past is dead, — dead as my future,' he went on. 'What is God to you, a merchant for whose wares you traffic with beads and prayers!' His scorn threaded itself even through the panoply of her reckless misery, and, as at a touch, her mood of the foregone hour changed.

‘ True,’ she said. ‘ Listen, and I will tell you. Thus it is I pray. I say, “ God, give me truth,” or, it may chance, “ God, give me love. Truth pure as crystal, love of snow-white fire. But the truth and the whiteness are nothing to me. O God! Truth false as Judas, love red as blood — give me these and they shall be as dear to me, so God, they be thy gift.” ’

She broke off—her pause was like laughter, but she did not laugh. ‘ See, Sylvanus, so women prize good and ill alike, so the hand that renders them is the hand we kiss. Love is our conscience; other conscience have we none. Hear me, to Joel I would pray, “ Give me your hate — and as your gift it shall be dear to me.” ’

Unconsciously she held out her slight pale hands towards her companion. He started, the wrists were discolored, the palms were scarred. He looked from them to her face, its oval was sharp with fasting, hunger had marked her lips, the rims of her eyelids were dark with watching. Was it thus she had sought her soul?

She divined his question.

‘ Yes,’ she said, ‘ there is no rack upon which I have not laid my life. I have toiled all the night and have taken nothing. I am not good

enough for God, and my sin has found no consecration in suffering. I have found nothing of all I sought, for how can a woman escape her womanhood?’

Sylvanus threw himself half-jesting at her feet.

‘Poor hands,’ he cried, ‘shall I kiss off their scars?’

At his kiss she tried to break from him, but his grasp was iron to her weakness.

‘If a knife were in your hands I should feel its edge,’ he said. ‘But your anger is not because your hand hates, but because it loves, my kisses.’ And twice again he kissed as he had kissed before.

The anger of the woman died—a fear was born. Were his words true?

‘Do I not love Joel?’ she cried.

‘You love Joel, but likewise you love love, and likewise, again, you love love’s gifts. Come to me, Hesper, they are mine to give and yours to accept. Come, and I will make you forget your grief.’

‘Are you so strong?’ she asked, and she answered him, ‘I will not come.’

.

In the moonless darkness of the palace gardens a gay company was engaged in a fantastic game. The great globe of a spherical lamp, of which the flame burnt with dazzling brilliancy, occupied the centre of a wide lawn. An opaque revolving screen obscured its light save through one narrow aperture, from which a single track of whiteness passed from place to place, now illuminating the green gloom of the cypress shadows, now crossing the shaven turf, now irradiating the sombre ebony of the water pool. In the alternate gloom and brightness the players chased the shadows; where the image of the fliers fell, the pursuers would set their foot.

At the brim of the fountain basin Christa was seated; Joel was near by. Their lips observed the long silence of hearts that touch. Each watched the other, and Sylvanus, standing apart, watched both.

‘I have trodden upon a shadow,’ the cry of the victors in the game reached them.

‘In life it is the shadows that tread upon us,’ murmured Joel.

‘Shadows tread lightly, and leave no mark,’ Sylvanus laughed.

‘Once,’ Christa’s plaintive voice answered, ‘I saw in a lamp-lit street the iron of a horse’s hoof fall on the shadow of a man. I felt as though it crushed his breast.’

Hesper’s laughter, clear as a child’s, and freighted with the nameless sweetness of earth’s own laughter of stirred leaf and rippled sea, sounded across the lawn.

‘When a woman has broken her heart, she must laugh or weep — the happy woman weeps,’ Sylvanus muttered half aloud.

‘Of whom do you speak?’ Joel asked with a quick challenge.

‘Of Hesper.’ Sylvanus faced him accusingly; each read the other’s thought.

At Hesper’s name Christa’s eyes were overcast. The sensitive gayety of her mouth was gone.

Sylvanus looked from the one to the other.

‘It is destiny,’ said Joel, answering the unspoken charge.

‘The wind against which the soul’s ship sails,’ Sylvanus replied bitterly.

As he spoke Hesper came towards them swiftly. Unaware of Joel’s presence she reached the fountain’s brim.

‘I am victor,’ she cried to her pursuers. ‘The prize is mine.’

The brief forgetfulness of laughter held her, yet, even as she arrested her gay flight, the revolving shaft of light fell upon Joel, and cast her shadow beneath his feet.

‘Defeated!’ cried Sylvanus.

The sharp sting of remembrance whitened the delicate brilliance of her face.

‘Why does one ever dare forget?’ She pressed her hand to her breast as though in very deed her heart suffered with her shadow.

‘Those only dare forget who can forget they will ever remember,’ Sylvanus responded.

‘You hold no monopoly of grief.’ Joel came to her side, and the trouble of his face deepened; his words were for her alone.

‘But is my burden lighter because other shoulders are lacerated?’ she answered mournfully. ‘Ah, Joel, we are all alike, lost children crying in the night because the day is gone!’

His eyes filled with a deep compassion.

‘Rest, Hesper,’ he said gently.

He moved that she might take his place on the fountain’s ledge. In his voice was the echo of a past emotion.

Once in a squalid streetway Sylvanus had seen the worn face of a woman change into youth as she caught the note of a caged singing bird; so Hesper's face changed at that unwonted accent.

‘How hard hope dies in a woman's heart!’ Sylvanus said, watching her.

The disc of the newly risen moon hung over the feathery ridge of the cypress trees, the globe of light was extinct upon the lawn, the footsteps of Hesper's companions, the sound of their voices, came faintly from the farther courts of the gardens. But the group at the fountain lingered. Their fitful speech languished in the pervading tranquillity of the night. Now and then the light silver of a ripple crept over the water, or an overblown rose dropped its petals to the ground in the warm current of a wandering breeze. A tall stem crowned with white blossom rose like the ghost of a flower in the dusk, its fragrance drifted to them. Over Hesper's fretted spirit the spell of that serenity fell slowly; for a brief space, there, by Joel's side, peace signed its armistice with grief, and she rested in the paradise God fashions for those who are not

otherwise. In that green twilight, pain found its anodyne, the sting of Joel's condemnation was solaced and for the bitterness of his forfeited worship, she found a balm. Every emotion of life contains in itself a heaven and a hell; pain has its rapture, despair its hope, unrest its extremity of peace,—in life's utmost fever-fit the dews fall.

‘I will be content,’ she told herself. ‘My love has accomplished its supreme humiliation,—the shame of its humanity.’ What if, in very truth, love's godhead were the diviner for its incarnation? What if in the very womanhood she had striven to cancel and annul, love should find its ascension to the sunrise heights of snow and fire?

The little grass-blades shimmered in the moon's whiteness, greens darkened into black-veined blueness, the wet laurel leaves shone like metal, the small pebbles took tints of opal and pearl at her feet. And Joel's hand sought hers.

‘Hesper,’ he said, calling her. Her name — his touch. Her dream of peace was gone. The pulse of the darkness wakened and stirred again, and the pulse of her heart answered it.

Content! Content to endure that heart's

abstinence of happiness, content to accept that rack of unsatisfied longing! Content to love without love's dear reward! Ah, no! Once more the sun burnt on the red blossoms of the convent garden, and the shadows of the ilex trees slanted across the grasses, once more Joel stood there beside her, — in the first love-hour of her life, — once more Joel's kisses were upon her lips, who now but laid his hand upon her hand. And hell was thrice hell to her for sake of the heaven which had been.

She released herself from his touch; she went from him with the halting steps of a woman who bears her chain with her, and going, it seemed to Hesper as though her heart wept its track of red tears upon the night. Never to hold his child upon her breast, never to shelter her head within his arms, never to feel love's weakness robbed of its disgrace by the sweetness of his kisses, never to find love's forfeitures a hundred-fold repaid by the tenderness of his caress!

What was all else the world held dear, to her if this were so? Pain and pain and pain, — and beyond, death's blank asterisk.

‘God, give me back his love! I who have lost Thy heaven cry to Thee, give me my earth!’

So she prayed, but God kept His profoundest silence.

And under the high window of her lonely chamber, two shadowed figures lingered in the court, — Christa's white against white in the starlight, and Joel's gray.

.

It was the day of a festival. A surging crowd passed and repassed in diverse currents of an ill-assorted medley. Bands of riotous pleasure-seekers, wandering pedlers, strolling mountebanks, and musicians in fantastic garb jostled one another on the pavement of the narrow streets, or gathered in companies around the tavern doors, while through the press of revellers an inflowing train of dark-robed pilgrims forced their way towards the sombre shrine of the great church which dominated the market-place.

In the market-place was a brilliant pageant, a pageant of waving flags, of tinsel baubles, of color and movement; a restless human sea, with its shadows and gleams, its contrasts and uniformities, where banner opposed banner, pageant pageant, as the rival forces of penitence and passion encountered face to face. Here an

uplifted crucifix shadowed itself upon the grotesque emblazonment of a puppet show. God's heraldry, the insignia of martyred saint or tortured confessor, or death's ensign, with its superscription, 'Salvator mundi,' confronted a clown's rattle or a juggler's cap and bells, and the venerated symbols of religion were travestied in the masquerade of pleasure's devices.

Together Hesper and Sylvanus mingled with the crowd. The clash and clamor, the priests' sullen litanies, the beat of drum and fanfaronade of trumpets sounded in their ears. They possessed Hesper's senses with the contagion of their varied vitality. Sylvanus watched her with silent curiosity. She grew impatient of his scrutiny.

'Listen and look,' she cried.

'I am listening and I am looking,' he replied. 'I hear the music in your eyes, and I see the crowd's movement in your voice; I feel its fever throb in your pulses, its loves, its hates, its sins, and its remorse beat in your veins. Come,' — he drew her from the shelter of a gateway, whence she had surveyed the motley scene, — 'come and join it.'

'Yes,' she assented, 'let us seek what we can find.'

‘And let us seek only that,’ he responded. Near by, a small circle of bystanders had gathered round the figure of a gypsy vagabond, a woman who, with vivid mournful eyes, touched the strings of a zither-shaped instrument, preluding an irregularly rhythmmed melody. Sylvanus laid a gold coin on the strings — the woman was beautiful. ‘Sing,’ he said. The woman laughed. But she looked to Hesper.

‘I sing for you,’ she said.

Half crouching on the stones she sang:

‘Upon the earth there fell a stain one day.

The sun said, “I will burn that stain away,”

And the sun shone and shone. But there the stain
still lay.

‘The rain said, “I will fall and fall until

My tears have washed it white.” And cold and chill

The slow rain fell and fell. But there the stain lay
still.

‘And Death said, “I will cover, cover all,”

Death covered it. It crimsoned Death’s white pall,

And still the stain lay where the stain did fall.’

The singer swept her brown hand over the strings, jarring them to a blurred dissonance which vibrated to silence.

‘The stain is everywhere,’ she cried, her face raised to Hesper’s.

On each was the self-same flush, — the lips had the self-same line, the temples were marked each with the same slight indenture; but Hesper’s eyes were the eyes that search, and the vagabond’s were the eyes that know the end of the search.

‘Miserere nos, Domine,’ the pilgrims’ chant came by. Pilgrims all! Pilgrims of penitence, pilgrims of passion, each flying the goal the other pursued.

And the stain was everywhere!

Then suddenly to Hesper’s lips came the vindication her heart dared not utter.

‘But it fell from heaven,’ she cried.

‘From heaven,’ repeated the vagrant. Her mournful eyes lit; she sprang to her feet, tall and lithe in the tattered beggar-hood of a woman’s fallen royalty. Then her face changed.

‘What know you of heaven?’ she said. ‘The dust of dead kisses is upon your lips.’

She turned away, and threading the crowd with swift steps, she was lost to sight among the press.

Sylvanus laughed.

‘She spoke truth,’ he exclaimed. What know you of heaven?’

But Hesper heard him with blank, uncomprehending eyes. The trampling feet, the surging multitude, the din and the clatter, the pedler’s cries, the shrill notes of the mountebank’s fife, were besieging and encompassing her senses with their clamor. The dust and the glare oppressed her, the hot air suffocated her.

‘Take me from here,’ she cried imploringly. ‘Sylvanus, take me from here.’

She was trembling as she clung to him for support with frozen hands that no sun could warm, — she to whom fear and cold were as alien as snow to summer.

‘Sylvanus, Sylvanus,’ she murmured brokenly, ‘life is killing me.’ Then, uttered beneath her breath, he caught the cry of her heart’s continual craving.

‘Joel, Joel, come to me,’ she cried.

Once, beneath the midnight twilight of the stars, Sylvanus had listened as with her ears for the sound of Joel’s home-coming. Again the intensity of her longing infected him with expectancy. Hearing her cry, the limits of the

senses seemed to him cancelled and annulled, and the barriers of space annihilated. Life cried to life; surely the voice of that cry must reach its mark. Joel must hear, and hearing come. The extremity of her need must compel him to her side, the magnitude of her weakness must draw him to answer it. Involuntarily Sylvanus turned his head to see if indeed Joel were not there. The impression was but momentary, yet Hesper with rapid intuition divined the drift of his thoughts.

‘He is not there, he will not come,’ she said. ‘Once I too looked as you look for his coming; but he will not come.’

He drew her aside from the crush, guiding her in silence through unfrequented by-ways, until they reached the palace gates. Then again she spoke.

‘If I had loved him less, Sylvanus,’ she said slowly, ‘it might have been, I might have won my joy; and yet, and yet’—she lifted her face, it was pale with exhausted pain, and the white dust of the road-way clouded her hair—‘I would not love him less, less I would not give him, although so doing I might pur-

chase all. He is my heaven and my hell, — he is the very God of my life, and my suffering is my treasure because it is the mark his hand has printed upon me.'

'Where?' he asked.

She faced him, standing erect in the deep gateway of the inner court.

'Upon my soul and upon my body,' she said. 'Sylvanus, leave me now and forever, — even earth has its consecration, and I am his.'

'Joel loves Christa, and she him,' was his merciless reply.

'I know it,' Hesper answered.

'Come to me,' he said. 'Give what you can. The rest I will take.'

Before she had answered him, 'I will not come;' now she kept silence.

.

The stars were invisible, the moon was yet unrisen, the darkness was so intense that the night seemed lost in its own obscurity, — it was a blank in vacancy. Hesper could not sleep. In the adjacent chamber Christa lay dreaming. Hesper heard her sobbing in her dreams.

Joel loved Christa: for what could Christa grieve?

The crowd of the market-place, the faces of its men and women, pursued her; she could not free her fancy from their pressure. But here in the night the day's riot of color, the flash of life, was gone. Memory represented the gay tumult only in a harsh grotesque, a tragic pasquinade; and each passer-by wore a leaden mask, each thrust upon her, passing, the contamination of their thoughts, — one a squalid crime, another a ribald blasphemy, another an unknown instinct. Their fever poisoned, their souls' maladies lodged within her.

‘Let me sleep, let me sleep,’ she cried.

For some space she slept, then again she started from her sleep.

‘Joel, Joel, come to me.’ She stretched out her arms in the irresponsiveness of the night. Since when had she wakened without his name upon her lips !

The impatience of her impotent pain overmastered her. When, when would Sylvanus's words come true, when would change touch her love with the pitiless, merciful death-grace of its sword? When would the sun shine again upon her, the winds fan her, the leaves and the flowers and the grass and the cool dews of earth's little

joys break their way back to her? And why did Christa, Christa whom Joel loved, still sob as she slept? Hesper rose and lit her lamp; within the sound of that frightened sobbing she could not sleep.

From the wall a serene Virgin, clasping in her arms the Divine Child, looked down upon the woman whose arms were empty. Hesper's eyes fell upon the picture; the joy of that calm motherhood stung her with sharp jealousy, — the envy of her barren womanhood for those fair virgin hands which held their prize in such fast embrace.

‘O Mother of God,’ she cried in the temerity of her suffering, ‘you have your Baby, give me mine, — mine and his.’

She threw herself upon her knees before the tranquil image; she let the hunger of that covetous desire eat its way into her soul as her gaze dwelt upon the sight of the Godhead eclipsed in a baby's kissing lips and clinging caresses; so perfectly eclipsed, indeed, that in the completeness of His human childhood God seemed to have forgotten His origin; the divine heredity of His descent.

And the hours wore on, and the hunger wore

itself away, and the aching sickness gave place to a tired drowsiness; then it seemed to Hesper as though Mary also, even in her felicity, grieved.

‘Poor Mary,’ she whispered, ‘you hold your Baby; yet hold Him close as you may, what motherhood is there between a woman and a God?’

The slow hot tears of pity gathered in her eyes and fell in heavy drops, but she left her place and turned away. She would not give God her tears, the tears which fell for her lost joys; she would not kiss His feet with the kisses which were not for Him.

‘I love God too well,’ she murmured, ‘too well to go to Him.’

She went to the window and threw the casement wide open. Would the day ever dawn? Across the inner court of the palace she could see the northern wing where was the long gallery, and the picture Sylvanus had painted, — Sylvanus with his face like a winter sea, — Sylvanus who derided, despised, pitied, and overmastered her.

He asked nothing save her lips and her brows, and her hands where the scars were

healed, and her feet whose bruises were gone. He would take the rest. Was he so strong?

Could he stay the craving of her heart-hunger and allay the pangs of that mortal malady which usurped the empire of her life, could he blot out the divine image of that earth-love which she had consecrated to Joel? Why strive any more with vain endeavor to keep single that service, that love of loves, which claims no recompense, which asks no gift nor any reward of love's giving? Why pursue any longer, unsolaced, the road of love's lonely pilgrimage, of which the goal is that unpurchasable coronet, jewelled with thorns, and bathed in the blood of the pierced brows of human nature?

Soul and body, body and soul, forever on the battlefield of that eternal war, in which neither is victor and in which neither is slain! Would the day ever dawn? A thin moon, the moon of the unborn day, rose; its pale light illuminated the white court below, and the windows of the gallery opposite. A figure moved in the gallery. Sylvanus, too, wakened and watched!

Life had refused her joy, God had refused her the soul she sought, Joel had refused her love. There was no midway path between earth and

heaven. Sylvanus had bidden her come, — to him she would go.

She passed like a ghost through the corridors of the sleeping palace. She gained the entrance of the gallery, opened the door noiselessly, and entered.

At the further end stood the canvas; in the grayness of the moonlight she could discern the whiteness of its painted figure. Before it Sylvanus knelt. She went towards him swiftly.

‘I have come,’ she said, ‘I whom you scorn, to grant all that you demand. I give to you my feet to kiss, my hands to hold, my heart which is Joel’s, my soul which was God’s. Fulfil your promise, to me give peace.’

He rose gropingly to his feet. A dun-coloured mist-light filled the place, the first advent of dawn. Hesper looked on the canvas.

The outstretched arms, the white feet were there, rose-hued; but the rose-hue was, as it were, the dew of blood; life had faded from the rounded oval of the face, the red serpents of the hair upon the temples were jagged thorn wounds, the droop of the falling eyelids was the droop of dying, the languor of the limbs was the

languor of eternal sleep, and the green grass was stained and red beneath that bleeding figure.

‘As the bird from the snare of the fowler, so would I fly from Thee, O God.’

Hesper heard the painter’s cry.

‘What have I done,’ he said, ‘that Thou pursuest me, blotting out my Lady of Joy with a whole Calvary of agony?’

He wrested his gaze from the figure as a man drags his feet from the chain of a dream. He held Hesper’s fingers in his grasp, he drew her to him.

‘You come like the ghost of death,’ he whispered.

Again his eyes wandered from her.

‘So is it ever — ever thus,’ he murmured. ‘The hand paints above, but the soul paints under it.’

Hesper’s eyes were dark as death. She withdrew her hands from his hands, her kiss from his kisses.

‘A soul! Have such men as you souls?’ she echoed his derision of bygone days. But as she spoke, remembrance touched her with its finger.

‘So destiny treads us underfoot; give God His due,’ she said, — ‘Joel to Fate, you to God.’

The pallor of her face was like a drift of ashes; her eyes, with their black rims, were tinged with dusky purples. There is a struggle in which the body kills the soul; there is no less surely one in which the soul kills the body. Neither of the two stirred as the slow daybreak cast the sharpening outline of the window's stone-work upon the floor.

Hesper knelt; her face was hidden. Sylvanus saw nothing save the blood-drops in the grass which his hand had painted, and the stained thorn-crown upon the lacerated brows of his dead God.

At length Hesper moved and rose.

He lifted his eyes once more upon her, to whose hand he would, for love's stars, have given dust.

Those hands were raised as the hands of a suppliant. Joel's name was on her lips.

'Give him, dear God,' she prayed, 'joy.'

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It was noon, the noon of Hesper's marriage-day. In the octagonal room, where once the watchers had outwaked the night for Joel's home-coming, men and women again passed to and fro. From the stone balcony Joel looked

across the plain of ripe wheat and yellow maize; not the shadow of a cloud passed over their whiteness, — beyond glittered the tinsel of the sea, near at hand the city was silent in the heat. In the blazing sapphire of the sky a thousand sparks flitted about, dazzling his eyes like broken star-points.

Hesper was long in coming.

She was nothing to him save the woman he had once loved, — this woman who should be his wife. He loved Christa and she him, and Hesper stood between them.

But Christa's face faded from his memory. His thoughts drifted back, scene by scene, to the morning when first he had looked upon Hesper's beauty. Hesper, whom he had worshipped and forsaken, came back to him; he felt the touch of her frightened hands, the shrinking surrender of her passionate tenderness. Remembrance took fresh colors upon it, — it wore the semblance of a forgotten regret.

He recalled her fruitless strife on the night of his home-coming, her endeavor to give less lest she should thereby forfeit all, to replace her love's royal largesse with wisdom's meagre dole. She had striven greatly; more greatly she had

failed. Remembrance was like a repentance for a joy foregone. And in all these later days he had seen the sad mouth, the eyes which were broken-hearted for knowledge of his dead worship and his unborn love; and he had lifted no hand to ease the burden or lessen the sharpness of her wounding. Remembrance became like a remorse for an irreparable past.

‘Is Hesper come?’

From within they answered him:

‘She will come presently.’

Christa had stolen to his side; she stood near him, her small face was like a pale flame. Joel did not see her. She spoke; he did not hear. She watched his eyes set on the distant fields. She hid her face. It was for Hesper’s coming he waited. The hum of multitudinous insects sounded around the bloom of the fragrant orange-trees in the garden below.

Hesper would come soon, and he would meet her, and he would kneel before her, and he would say:

‘I was not worthy of your love.’

The notes of a violin rose from some hall window below; then they ceased suddenly; a door opened. The voices in the room within were hushed.

‘She is come,’ some one said. Then again all was still.

But she was not come.

By his canvas Sylvanus knelt, and in the harvest fields, upon the sultry earth, where the reddest poppies had dropped their petals, and where the ripe corn was yellow as gold, Hesper lay dead.

II

THE SWORD OF MICHEL

MY Lady Michel had grown to fair womanhood in the austere cloisterage of her father's episcopal palace. To his motherless daughter the grave bishop-prince had been at once a father, a mother, and a priest. Now, in my lord's home the serene joy of Michel's youth found its wedded happiness. In my lord's love her joy was fulfilled; it was a joy so great that almost it seemed to her a sin.

Her eyes were the eyes of a child, her kisses were the kisses of a saint. Sin had warded its secrets from her soul, lest her soul, touching them, should infect them with its whiteness. To Michel's eyes no bar-sinister lay across the field azure of life's unblazoned shield.

Her security was as great as her joy.

‘I would I knew how such grave, gray-eyed children keep their lord’s hearts at home,’ my lord’s gay sister said one day in jest.

My lord only smiled, but Michel answered:

‘They wed only the hearts that need no keeping save that of their own high honor.’

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Michel had been wedded a year. That summer my lord took her to dwell a while in the great red stone manor, which once had been the home of Michel’s dead mother.

Wide wheat fields surrounded the manor; a slow, low-banked river knotted its broad ribbon of blue water among the meadows and orchards of the green pastures; tall, solitary elms and groups of tapering poplar-trees made blots of darker green where the corn whitened and the barley grew brown for harvest; the lights and shadows played changing pageants over the level land.

‘All these are thy lands,’ said my lord to Michel, as they stood together at the oriel window of her chamber.

She laughed as her eyes followed his, resting upon that landscape of fair domains, — her dowry of great possessions.

‘Almost I would it were not so,’ Michel made answer. ‘Almost I would that I had come to thee empty handed and poor. So hadst thou been my only riches, as thou art my only joy, my sweetness, my honor, and my hope.’

My lord kissed her hand. Other reply made he none, nor did she speak any further word. The love in her heart was so great that silence alone was adequate to confess its immensity.

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Her joy seemed greater than she could bear; gladness, like grief, has its own weight when it falls on a woman’s heart. She sought joy’s asylum in charity.

It was the Feast of the Assumption. Playing and singing in the wheat, Michel found two vagrant human flowers,—a girl and a boy. They were twin buds of life,—yellow-haired, rose-lipped, blue-eyed; but the blue eyes of the girl were awake, while the blue eyes of the boy slept. To the girl life was daylight, to the boy it was dusk. But God, who withheld from him wisdom, had given him folly.

Michel took them to dwell in her home: the vagabond girl became her serving-woman;

the boy became my lady's Fool. They called the Fool Rayonet, and the girl they called Rayonnette.

‘Are not my children, whom I have found, fair as are the sunbeams?’ Michel asked my lord.

‘Children!’ he answered jesting. ‘A child's children!’

Rayonnette stood by Michel, and she was well-nigh as tall as my lady. And the Fool stood by Rayonnette, as a dream stands by life.

‘She has stolen the colors of the field — the ripe corn for her hair, the dark blue of the corn-flowers for her eyes, the pink of the white convolvulus is on her cheek, and her lips are the blood of scarlet poppies.’ So Michel spoke, as her eyes dwelt upon the girl's great loveliness.

‘And for her heart?’ my lord asked gayly.

‘For her heart!’ echoed Michel. ‘Have children hearts?’

My lord looked on Rayonnette and Rayonnette looked on him. A woman looked at him from her eyes, and he looked on a woman. And the Fool looked on both. A shaft of life

struck the Fool's dream; it made a splintered crack where before the twilight-painted windows of his mind were unflawed. A thin thread of daylight came through the crack and wound its way round his heart.

The four were together in the great apple orchard, where the fruit fell noiselessly from the thick foliage into the thick grass. Rayonnette, with the womanhood in her eyes, strayed on before with swift, fitful steps; Rayonet lagged behind, yet near at hand. He sang softly to himself as he walked, but the words of his song halted on his lips:

‘The fool’s song is merry, merry, merry,
Merry and gay;
Bitter and sweet, like the elderberry,
Is the wise man’s lay.’

The verse reached my lord’s ear.

‘Have the Fool’s songs, as the girl’s face, no heart?’ he asked jestingly.

Michel paused musing, listening.

‘The wise man sees, but the fool is wiser,
And God is kind.
Wits to the wise. But God is no miser,
He made the fool blind.

The imperfect rhythm jarred, and the boy’s

voice was faint and uncertain as the cadence died away.

And Michel answered:

‘Whether or no his songs have a heart I cannot tell, yet sometimes I think that though his mind is blind, his heart sees.’

‘Alas, poor Fool!’ my lord replied, ‘that were an unkind fate. Better that the mind should see, and the heart be blindfold.’

‘Wherefore?’ she asked, and her hand rested in his hand as love rests when it has found its home.

‘Dear archangel,’ said my lord, ‘know you not that the mind is steel, but from the hurts of the world’s wounding the heart wears no armor save its own blindness?’

The Fool had drawn nearer; his face was like the face of a spirit, framed in the sunlit radiance of his hair. A shaft of sunlight fell upon it through the dusky green canopy of the apple boughs. He listened for my lady’s speech as the cherubim hearken round the Throne. But Michel had forgotten the Fool. The rose-cloud of her soul’s flame drifted across her face.

‘Not so,’ she cried; ‘my heart is armored in the love of its lover.’

She lifted her lips to my lord's. Her kiss was like a snowflake of passion. Her eyes were the heralds of her heart, unashamed in love's royal prerogative, — the right to surrender all.

My lord looked down upon her, hiding the incredulous wonder of his gaze. Never before had she in such wise exempted her love from its rule of silence.

‘Was such love possible?’ he asked himself. ‘Could flesh and blood inherit the Kingdom of God, and earth be deified? Like the holy Children of old, could a woman stand thus unscorched amid the fire?’

‘Michel,’ he said, ‘I stand, but my heart kneels.’

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The harvest came. Night by night the great round moon hung between heaven and earth over the fields. It seemed nearer earth than heaven. It was the third evening of harvest. The air was windless; even the poplar leaves were becalmed.

‘The stillness is so great that I feel as though it were not the earth which is mute, but that it is my ears which are closed,’ Michel said,

as from the high oriel window of her chamber she watched the heavy rising of that yellow disc.

Her father was beside her; his face, tender and austere, worn with vigils and fasts and penances, was in the shadow; Michel stood in the light.

Set in the stone frame-work of the window's wide circle was one painted figure — Michael, the Archangel. Amid the darkness of reds and purples and blues, his sword gleamed white as metal. The priest made no reply to her words.

‘Michel,’ he said, ‘here your mother dwelt with me in the home of her first love days. She looked at me with your eyes, she spoke to me with your voice, — the voice of her unborn child. She said, “God has left Himself no greater joy to bestow upon me.” Michel, how is it with you?’

Michel answered.

‘As it was with her in your love, so is it also with me.’

The priest blessed God.

Beneath the window on the broad stone ledge of the balcony the Fool lay; above was the

armed figure of the painted Archangel. The sound of those two voices came down to him. His eyes wandered over the fields in their white illumination. While he looked he listened.

‘Truly, in the gladness of my child,’ the priest spoke aloud, ‘I go hence bearing the sheaves of my joy with me.’

The priest blessed Michel.

The Fool’s eyes followed a narrow path which led across the unreaped corn. A figure, like a silver shadow, went down the path between the walls of moon-gilded wheat. The daylight crack in the Fool’s mind widened.

‘Bless him also, O my father, whose hands hold my heart and whose heart is held in my hands,’ Michel said.

The priest obeyed and blessed him.

The Fool’s eyes dwelt upon the reaped barley field beyond the standing corn. Among the tall sheaves two shadows passed to and fro.

‘My lord tarries late at the reapers’ feast,’ said Michel. Her steps moved from the window and all was still above.

The moon was setting. The edge of the reddening globe touched the horizon, a solitary windmill with cross-way wings stood out black

against the shining radius of the sky. The moon sank, the black arms vanished. The fields were empty. Once more steps stirred above in the window's oriel. Once more the Fool listened to Michel's voice and my lord was with her.

‘Men say that love, like time and space, being infinite, is known only by what it is not. But it is not so; they do not understand. They alone who love know love, and they know love by love's very self. I know and understand.’

And my lord answered her.

‘Since when, Michel?’

‘Since our first love hour. That day I went down the street. A woman met and stayed me. She looked into my face with hungry eyes, and then she kissed me suddenly. It was not me she kissed ; it was a memory, the memory of her own lost joy, which your hand had written on my face. After that day I went veiled, lest the wonder of men reading my gladness should profane its mystery.’

She waited to give silence time to slip between thought and thought.

‘If love's greatness were not infinite,’ she

spoke again, 'I would say I could not love more greatly. Is such love sin?' she asked.

'Dear heart,' my lord made answer, 'if such love be sin, God must make a new heaven for your soul's innocence!'

Once more the voices were hushed and all was still. The moon was gone, the blue darkness was peopled with faint star points.

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Rayonnette slept on the low white couch of her turret chamber. The afterlight of moonset filled the room with twilight gray. Her head was pillowed on her out-spread hair; her face, faintly flushed, lay netted in the burnished threads like a rose leaf caught in a cobweb of gold. One bare arm was outstretched upon a coverlet; at the bend of the arm a deep blue vein traced its dark outline of color even in the dusk.

The Fool knelt beside the bed. The sense of his presence penetrated her slumber, her eyes half opened upon his eyes which watched, and a faint smile of unsurprised pleasure crept to her lips. She lifted her arm and drew his face to hers. She loved him.

'You wake,' she whispered drowsily. She

lay there languid with the hot breath of the summer night, a child, his playmate, — his twin heart! What had he dreamt out there on the stone balcony in the moonlight flood? Dreams of shadows which the mad moon threw, dreams which like the moon were gone. His heart laughed in its joy.

‘Hush, little sister, sleep,’ he said, ‘sleep.’ Suddenly she roused from her half slumber. The tears of his gladness had fallen upon her hand.

‘Rayonet, you weep,’ she cried.

His lips opened for denial. The web of her hair, stirred with her wakening movement, fell upon his eyes. He brushed it from them; tangled in it was a broken spike of brown bearded barley.

He sprang from her clasp.

‘I weep red tears, — red tears,’ he sobbed.

‘Come back, come back, Rayonet, come back,’ the girl cried soothingly. But he was gone. She sank back into slumber, scarcely aware that she had wakened.

‘Poor Rayonet,’ she murmured in her sleep, for Rayonet was a Fool.

Rayonet fled, but he carried with him the

spear of daylight, which pierced and wounded his heart.

.

It was noon. Michel and my lord stood on the steps of the Manor. She looked upon the wide fields and the winding river, and bade them farewell.

‘Next harvest we will return,’ said my lord.

Michel looked on Rayonet and Rayonette. His face was more like sorrow than sorrow is like itself. Rayonnette looked on my lord, and the womanhood in her eyes was full-grown.

Michel bade farewell to them.

‘Next harvest we will return,’ said my lord.

He kissed the girl’s fair face; the eyes of the Fool awakened; he caught the hem of my lady’s raiment and his lips touched it. His soul was on his lips. He hid his face as Michel went forth from her home among the fields, but Rayonnette watched my lord out of sight.

.

It was again harvest. Rayonet wandered from the fields of corn to the field of sleep. He

lay in the grass; a strand of gold hair bound his bells; he wore a peacock's feather jewelled with eyes of purple and green and blue.

He sang softly to himself:

Two field flowers in my lady's garden

Grew on one stem, grew on one stem.

Two field flowers! Them the kind Christ pardon,

One my lord kissed, one kissed my lady's hem.

One field flower in my lady's garden

Died on the stem, died on the stem.

One slew the other. Her the kind Christ pardon,

She kissed my lord — I kissed my lady's hem.

The tears of the Fool fell in time to the rhythm of his song.

Michel stood beside him. Beneath the grass at her feet Rayonnette slept.

'Poor Fool,' said Michel, 'do you not know me? I have come home.'

The Fool kissed the ground where her shadow fell.

'Poor lady,' he cried, 'know you me?'

The eyes of Michel were misted with her tears. He sprang to his feet.

'Why do you weep?' he cried. 'My lord will never kiss her more. Between his lips and hers the grass is green.'

Poor, poor lady, nobody knew,
Only the Fool saw and the Fool was true,
Slew his little sister for the love of you.

The words halted, he broke the hair from
his bells. Michel wept. He rang them merrily.

‘Listen! They ring, for you are come.’

The daylight in the Fool’s heart died; he
watched her tears.

‘Like you not my jest?’ he said.

‘My last jest and my best?’ Then with a
start, ‘Hush!’ he whispered, ‘lest she wake.’

He went from Michel and slipped into the
tremulous shade of the poplar-trees beyond the
graves.

Michel came homeward.

‘Rayonnette is dead,’ she told my lord sadly.
‘And he, my Fool, will die of grieving. Alas,
he being blind in his folly, slew her.’

She laid her arms about my lord’s neck, and
her head rested above his heart. She could
not see his face.

‘Sorrow not so bitterly,’ he said.

Through her tears she smiled.

‘O my true, true love,’ she cried, sheltered
in that harborage of her trust, ‘joy can afford
to grieve.’

.

She went from him. The white blade of her love pierced his heart. The night came. Michel slept. By the oriel window of her moonlit chamber my lord stood. Above him was the figure of the mailed archangel. Below were the wheat fields and the fields of brown barley, and beyond the fields, the field of sleep where Rayonnette lay.

My lord's face was very white. 'Michel,' he murmured, breaking the hush of the midsummer night, 'Michel — with the sword.'

III

A SCARLET SHADOW

NO one living had ever seen it except the old peasant woman who had been Lea's nurse. She had seen it twice. The first time she saw it was when Lea was a baby; she saw it again when Lea had ceased to be a baby. The first time she saw it, it was quite faint, faint in outline and faint in color; but she knew it had a shape and a color, she knew that it was a shadow, and she knew that the color of the shadow was red. It fell on the threshold of the outer door of Lea's home. The old woman did not cross the threshold; she carried the baby she held into the house by another way.

The second time she saw it Lea was a child. Then the shadow fell upon the threshold of the door of the room where Lea slept.

The old woman went to the priest of the village near. She told him of the shadow which she had seen.

‘A shadow, a shadow of what?’ asked the priest.

‘It is the shadow of an unborn sin,’ the old peasant answered him.

The priest smiled. He was a new-comer in the village, a young man from a seminary. He had modern ideas. He called the superstitions of the peasants the relics of childhood, — they were relics for which he had no veneration. He did not reverence them, he analyzed them instead. When a relic ceases to be a relic it becomes a curiosity.

‘Now, the shadow lies upon the threshold of her door; one day it will cross it; it will come within reach of her. Later it will touch her, and, last of all, it will fall upon her and cover her,’ the old peasant woman continued.

‘When?’ said the priest.

‘When the sin is born,’ the woman replied.

‘When is a sin born?’ the priest pursued his inquiry.

‘It is born when it becomes a deed,’ she answered. Then she said: ‘One day the shadow

will show itself to Lea; she will come to you for help. When it touches her let her die.'

'When it shows itself to her I will remember,' said the young priest.

He told the story to the old priest of the neighboring village. He was anxious to trace the origin of the superstition, he said; it was the first time he had come across it. Father Martin was old, gray-headed, and crippled with the slow agony of a mortal malady. He had lived so long that many things appeared to him possible.

'It is not always well to identify the unknown with the impossible,' he told the young priest. Father Christoph said no more. He classed old age with childhood and ignorance, and Father Martin was old.

The old peasant woman died. Lea was then little more than a child, — a slight, pale child, with great eyes, blue as harebells, and dusky hair. She was too pretty to be beautiful, and too beautiful to be pretty. She was very grave, — graver than the nuns who brought her up. She looked upon life as a religion, afterwards she looked upon it as something else, but she never looked upon it as more than one thing at

a time. To her it was a single thread, not a complex web. That is always a danger for a woman, it is the vital essence of fanaticism; and fanaticism, which of a man makes oftenest a rebel, makes of a woman always a slave. The bent of a man's nature is opposition; of a woman's, surrender: men are born mutineers, women are born devotees.

Lea was born a devotee. Her first devotion was an idea; the idea she called God. Not the God of the young seminarist priest, a God who was all-just, all-wise, and all-good; but the God of the poor peasant people of the village, the God who counted the tears of mourners by chaplets, and their kisses by rosaries, as they fell upon the feet of the wayside Calvaries. That God was her God; her worship was not a creed but a life, and it was the whole of life to her. It is safer that life should be an instrument of many strings, even although the single string be God. For from one worship to another is an easy transition; it is but the diversion of the same stream to a new river-bed.

With Lea the first stage of the transition was a treason, the second a mutiny; after that the

new worship became a new subjection. It is God's rebels who make man's slaves.

When Lea was nineteen she saw the shadow. It was only a tinge of color, it lay like a flush upon a garden bed of white lilies. Lea stooped to pick the rose-tinted blossoms, but when she held them in her hand the color was gone from them. The shadow was within reach of her but it could not touch her.

'The sunshine dazzled me. I thought the lilies were pink,' Lea said.

The same thing happened again; the second time she thought about it a little, then she forgot it, the time of lilies was past.

Lea was very rich. The villa, the gardens, the vineyards around were all her own. But Lea was very lonely. Between her home and the world which was beyond her home was a great solitude, a desolate plain of sunburnt land; in summer a waste of parched grass and dried reed-beds of rank nettles and thorn bushes; in winter a wilderness of sodden leaves overhung with the heavy dampness of low fever-mists.

Between her life and the world's life was a like severance: a crime of the past, a crime of

the dead, divided her from the life of the world. And Lea was the child of the dead. She had her mother's face, and she had her father's nature. Of her own she had the strength of concentrated weakness. The extremity of a weakness is often a force.

She had been alone ever since she could remember. She had been alone in the convent where she had learnt to read and to write and to pray. She had been alone in the great empty house, which was her home in the city beyond the plain, and she was alone now in the villa which she loved. But in its gardens and vineyards she did not know that she was alone.

Of life's knowledge she had learnt nothing; she was ignorant both of its good and of its evil, she was ignorant even of her ignorance. To be a woman is well, to be a child is better, to be both is to possess the safeguards of neither.

For two years she had lived in that unbroken solitude. Then again the shadow showed itself to her. It was dawn, the twilight of the earliest morning was in the room. Lea awakened. The shadow lay touching the edge of the white coverlet of the bed. It was nearer to her than when it had lain upon the lilies in

the garden. It had no outline, it was like a red light. Afterwards, when she was older, it was like a red darkness.

With half-open eyes, Lea watched the shadow. Then she fell asleep again, and she dreamt that the shadow which she had seen had been a dream.

When she wakened once more it was day. She remembered the dream, and she forgot the waking which had been before the dream. The dream had effaced the reality.

That morning she saw Father Christoph.

‘I dreamed I had dreamed of a red shadow,’ she told him. ‘It lay on the edge of the bed where I slept.’

‘Dreams are the masquerades of sleep,’ Father Christoph answered, smiling. ‘Night keeps carnival all the year round.’

And soon Lea had forgotten the dream she had dreamed.

At that time a human fellowship entered into her life, a human footstep surmounted the barrier which shut her in from the world.

It was afternoon; fearless of the sun’s heat, Lea had sought the garden terrace with its flower-beds of rose and carnation. One by one

she thrust her slim white fingers into the hearts of the flowers. She would feel which blossoms were softest. She loved their color and she loved the delicate tracery of vein and outline, she loved the incessant tremulous movement of each petal, their swift response to the unseen vibration of the warm air; but most of all, their touch was sweet to her, and the varied fragrance of their perfume. She went from blossom to blossom; she lifted a bent white rose to her cheek; she laid a lake-crimson leaf over her closed eyelids, — first she laid it on one, then on the other. The rose-leaf was cool and smooth, but she left the roses — the velvet of the purple-blue pansies was softer and warmer as she brushed it against her hand, and Lea kissed the face of the pansy she held as the sun had kissed it before.

Then she turned with a startled surprise from the flowers; some one was there beside her standing in the sunlight and he was asking his way of her, and his eyes laughed while he spoke.

‘I have lost the path to the highroad,’ he was saying to her, ‘and I cannot find my way back to it.’

Lea had never spoken with any man save

with the peasants of the village and the priests. The new-comer was neither a priest nor was he a peasant. She told him where the road which led to the village lay, and she told him how to find it, but he did not take the path she pointed out to him. He had found a new mark for his wanderings; it was reached by another thoroughfare, — the high-way to a woman's heart. It was a path he had often trodden; he knew each sign-post and each mile-stone and each halting place.

He stayed with Lea until the sun had set; the next afternoon and the next he came again to her. He was gentle and courteous and he was kind. Lea was happy.

One of those days was the eve of a great festival. In the confessional of the village church Father Christoph was a little startled.

‘Ah, father, God is good,’ Lea had cried as she rose from her knees.

Father Christoph had often heard it said before, but when Lea said it, it seemed to him that no one else had ever meant it. He had himself continually affirmed the goodness of God — no doubt he had felt it, only Lea felt it differently.

The younger man told the old priest of the

village near, the next time that he saw him. Father Martin, in the beautiful youth of his old age, guessed the truth.

‘The child has found some one to love,’ he said.

And when Father Christoph smiled he added:

‘When you are younger, Father Christoph, you will learn to understand many secrets.’

Afterwards he said,

‘Take care of her.’

Father Christoph dismissed the old man’s warning as he had dismissed the warning of the peasant nurse.

.
During the weeks that followed, a gay group of friends in the great city which was beyond the waste land missed a familiar figure from amongst them; Lea in her solitary village home had found a daily companion.

The two had little to say, one to another. Lea loved him, and a great love is a house of silence. Beyond her love she was ignorant; she knew neither life nor the books which tell of life.

‘You know nothing,’ he told her, jesting.

‘Teach me,’ she answered.

‘There is only one lesson worth learning; that is, to be happy,’ he said lightly.

‘I know it,’ she replied.

‘Then you need know nothing more,’ he said quickly. ‘To be happy — though a fool — is to be most wise.’

‘I think I have always been wise,’ she laughed softly.

So he had answered, yet in his mind he was conscious of a regret. Before he came she had not known she was happy. Now she had crossed the line which separates conscious from unconscious happiness. It is an immeasurably long remove. It implies the realized possibility of a reverse state. How would it end for Lea? The question arose in spite of himself. He had not a conscience but he had a heart. A heart often simulates a conscience, though a conscience seldom takes the semblance of a heart.

He told Lea that he must go from her. When he told her so, she put her arms round him with a child’s caress, and said:

‘Stay.’

And he stayed.

She had forgotten that between her and the world, to which he belonged, there was a barrier that love alone could defy, and she did not know that he did not love her. She loved him with a love which asked no questions of itself. Love comes diversely to diverse natures. To some women love is a possession, it belongs to them; other women belong to their love. Thus it had come to Lea. But he did not love her. She was not real enough to love, she was to other women as an echo is to a sound. True, she was the echo of a sound he had never before heard, and he was curious; he would willingly have tracked the echo to its origin. Lea baffled his curiosity. She was obedient, docile to his will, she would have laid her life in his hands, but that life remained shut from him. It was like the life of nature, of a gathered flower or a captured bird, his—to hold, to cherish, to crush, or to cast aside—but its secret remained hidden from him.

Would it ever unfold itself? Would she change, would life edge its way into her dream? Daphne may grow into a laurel-tree, but does the life of the laurel ever grow into a Daphne?

‘What would you have done if I had gone from you?’ he questioned one day.

‘I would have prayed God to die,’ she cried, clinging to him with frightened eyes.

He kissed the fear from her eyes, but he weighed her words moodily. He knew that when a woman says that she wants death it commonly means that she wants more life.

He knew everything. Lea knew nothing—she only felt.

Yet her gay happiness was gone. She was learning a new loneliness. The love of God detaches a heart from its fellows, it is its own cloisterage; the love of a woman for a man has a like isolation until it finds the unknown answer which it blindly seeks—then when the answer is found, its isolation holds two. This also he knew; of this too Lea was ignorant. There is a love which of a child makes a woman, there is likewise a love which of a woman makes a child. Such was Lea’s love. It is a love difficult for a man to understand. The day he did understand it, his heart again did duty for his conscience. He asked Lea to be his wife.

He did not quite know why he did so; a man’s virtues more often take him by surprise than his vices—with women the case is gene-

rally reversed. But however it might be, it was done. And when it was done he left her; he would return, he said, and when he returned she would go with him into a new life. She let him go unchecked; she wanted to be alone with her joy. Joy was a great mystery of which she felt the burden.

The night after he had left her she did not sleep. The moonlight flooded her room with whiteness. In its whiteness the shadow red-dened. She hid her eyes from it. This time no dream came after to dispel the reality.

At daybreak she rose, she sought Father Christoph.

‘A shadow, a scarlet shadow has come to me,’ she said, ‘though no eyes save mine have seen it.’

‘There are many such shadows,’ Father Christoph replied. ‘When the eyes of *two* have seen them it is time to disquiet one’s self.’

Lea saw that he gave her words no credence: she went home uncomforted.

.

The days passed; her lover did not return. At first Lea fed her fancy upon the future, afterwards she fed it upon the past — it is the

order in which hope dies. When it is fresh and strong it dwells upon life's promises, then, as it weakens, it dwells upon life's memories. In those weeks Lea relived as a woman the love-hours she had lived as a child, and reliving them her love changed. It changed into the love which of a child makes a woman. Her features altered, her eyes were like bluebells set on fire. She learnt to understand many things; she learnt to understand that he had not loved her.

She fled from her solitude to her city home—the home of the dead, the home of the mother whose eyes were hers, and the home of the father whose nature was hers, the home of their sin and of her birth. She read many books and she read life; its interpretation was in her heart. She had grown beautiful; her face had a background to it, the background of a sorrow. People turned in the street when she went by to look after her.

One day she lingered beside the shrine of a serene Madonna. 'Mary,' Lea cried, 'you have your Baby, give me back my lover.'

And he was there, standing beside her, they two, face to face, in the silent chapel. He

looked on her, but it was not upon the Lea he had once known. He had found, not the child he had caressed, but a woman to love. The signature of womanhood was upon her; she had become, not an echo, but a sound. She was real to him. She loved him with a love he could understand, and he loved her. She knew it.

She held out her hand to him; she asked no question, he pleaded no excuse. He took her hand—then he released it.

‘You have hurt your hand,’ he said; ‘it is bleeding.’

‘It was the sunlight through the stained window which fell on it,’ Lea answered.

But she covered her hand from his sight. There was not any redness in the painted window through which the sunlight fell.

The terror of life had overtaken her; she had won only to lose. ‘I have lied to him, and one day he will know it, and he will see the shadow and he will leave me.’ She fled from the city.

Father Christoph sat in the little study of the priest’s house. Lea came to him.

‘Two have seen it—two have seen the shadow,’ she cried; ‘its stain lay on my hands and I have come home to die.’

Father Christoph told her it was from the stain which lay on the heart alone that one should fly, that there was but one shadow which should terrify, the shadow of evil deeds. He told her more, for in his creed human nature had its consecration and its shrine.

‘God has given you the promise of joy,’ he said to her; ‘you are young, and by God’s grace you are innocent. Go back to your joy; joy is love’s birthright to a pure heart. Go back, — put fear aside.’

When he spoke to her of her love, the desire of life surged back upon her and overmastered fear. She did his bidding; she returned to the city.

When next her lover came to her she was very pale. Her room was hung with crimson hangings, and her gown was scarlet, so also were the flowers that she wore.

‘A caprice in red,’ her lover called her. ‘When you are my wife,’ he said, ‘the color shall be on your lips, and the whiteness shall be on the roses.’

Her eyes shone like faint blue stars as he spoke, then their shining faded.

‘Will you promise it?’ she asked sadly.

‘Can you not trust me?’ he demanded, watching her.

She answered nothing.

Once he had kissed fear from her eyes; now it was his kisses which printed terror upon them. She compassed herself with redness, but the scarlet lay upon the scarlet, the crimson upon the crimson, a shadow of red upon a background of red. Once she had seen it sometimes, now she saw it always; one day it would come closer yet, it would stain the whiteness of her face, it would dye her brows, and he would see it and he would leave her. She lived between a terror and a despair, — the terror was of his coming, of his dear presence; the despair that he came not, the despair of her loneliness. The sword was on either side her heart. And her love grew with her despair. Lea's face whitened more and more, the veins showed blue at her wrists, her life wasted itself away. And the weeks went by and her lover came more and more seldom; at length he came no more. Wearied with her delayings he had forsaken her.

Once in those days, unseen, Lea saw him pass. A girl with a fearless face was at his side, a girl between whom and the world no sin of the dead had set its irrevocable bar, be-

tween whose love and his no scarlet shadow fell.

The redness with which she had enclosed herself became as a prison-house to her, until she found there was a door to the prison-house. Life had played its game with her, and it had played with loaded dice. But life had won too much; it had outwitted itself in its victory, it had left her nothing to lose. It is the strength of the defeated.

The walls of her home had no longer any disguise of red hangings, the flowers might blossom pale as they would in her rooms. Her fears were dead as her joy, terror had lost its bondswoman.

In its place was a great blankness, and in the blankness her heart sickened.

She loved her lover no more, but she loved herself no more also, because he had ceased to love her. She had loved her hands because his hands had held them, she had loved her lips because his kisses had touched them, she had loved her life because she had laid it at his feet, had loved it because he had made it his. Now her hands, her lips, her very life, grew vile to her, — they became to her as things outcast and defaced,

because his touch had touched them and he did not love her. What love consecrates to heaven, when love is gone, is hell to the woman who is innocent. Lea was innocent, and her heaven lay desecrated and defiled.

The door she had found in the prison-house beckoned her, and the strength of her weakness grew.

There was a little court, an unfrequented silent court, behind the house which was her home. The court was full of clear light and gray shade. She had no fear left of the light nor of the shade. In the centre of the court was a fountain, and round the fountain was a dead water-pool. She sought the water-pool and looked down into it,—looked down on the blue eyes which the dust would soon cover, at the hands where the shadow's stain had been, at the small tired feet which he had kissed so often and forsaken.

In her hand she held the key of the door,—the little bright blade round which her slight fingers closed untrembling. It was such a little key, to such a great escape! She looked once again in the transparent ebony of the water's surface. She looked at her own image there,

and at the scarlet shadow which covered her, lips to lips, breast to breast, heart to heart. She heard the startled flight of a gray pigeon; she heard the sound of footsteps upon the flagged pavement.

He had come back, his arms were round her. She knew their strength, the strength she had never resisted. She matched her strength against it, her anger against his will, the anger of an unloved woman against the force of a man. She struck blindly; her hands were small and weak, but the steel in them was strong and sharp—it found its mark. Her anger died; he lay on the moss-grown stones, but he rested in her arms.

‘Lea,’ he said, ‘my feet wandered, but my heart came home. I could not live without you.’

He raised himself, he looked at her with the eyes which had always seen and known.

‘The shadow of scarlet is gone,’ he said.

The shadow was dead, but under that blue sky the sin was born.

IV

THE KNIGHT OF THE BLESSÉD MARY

ONCE, long ago, in the golden days when the great hurried cities of to-day were quiet village hamlets, with wide commons and far-reaching orchards, — commons where the gorse bloomed all the year round, orchards where the apples fell upon a tapestry of grass; when women twisted the yellow flax into threads like finest chain-work cord, as they spun by their home doors, when they dyed it the blue of corn flowers or bleached it the color of milk, when they wove it with silver thread and gold, and embroidered it with scarlet and green, — in those days there lived a very noble knight.

He was true and brave and courteous and gentle. He did battle for the weak and the

oppressed. No woman nor any child had ever besought his succor in vain. The poor blessed him in the street as he rode by, and because he had taken a vow upon him that he would never wed with any earthly woman, men called him the Knight of the Blesséd Mary.

On his shield, blazoned in gold, he bore her lily; on his banner, wrought in needle-work, he bore her name; and never was any maiden nor any lady so hardy as to say that she had won so much as a single love-token from his hand.

.

At the palace of the king, gold-haired Iolande dwelt, whose eyes were as gray as the clouded water-pools, and the veins of whose long white hands were like the blue of speedwell flowers. 'If it were nothing, nothing but a white rose or a red, that he would give to me!' So Maid Iolande whispered, between prayer and prayer, as she knelt in the palace chapel.

The Knight of the Blesséd Mary walked with Iolande in the wide gardens. On either side the pathway the rose bushes grew; red and white were their blossoms and green their leaves. The sun poured down its radiance, the

murmuring poplars threw shadow-bars across the mossy lawns. The web of Iolande's hair was like burnished threads of gold, its softness was like the softness of thistle-down, as her small feet trod the fallen rose-leaves upon the sun-checkered grass.

But for Iolande the Knight of the Blesséd Mary plucked no single blossom from the rose-boughs. 'What were one more rose to you on whose beauty roses have rained their homage from your birth?' he said, and so he answered to her entreating.

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'If it were but a leaf, — a leaf of the victor's laurel, won in the battles' lists, that he would give to me,' murmured the king's guest, the tall young princess from over the sea, whose hair was like the night, and whose eyes were noon-day sapphires.

Covered with the dust of the stricken field, the Knight of the Blesséd Mary checked his horse at the palace stair, and dropped a conquered banner at the king's feet. And the golden lilies on the victor's shield blinded her eyes as she stood near by.

'What were a laurel leaf to you?' to her

whispered beseeching he made answer. 'To you for whom whole groves of laurel grow, to you whose eyes win more captives than the swords of conquerors!'

.
 'It were not a great thing to ask that he should bend his lips to my hand when among my guests I honor him in my palace halls,' said Joan the queen.

But when, amid the revellers in the fountain court, the queen outstretched her hands in the silvered moonlight that his lips should touch them, the knight smiled, saying:

'Your hands hold the hearts of men, they stand in no need of men's kisses.'

And he said:

'Yet is it in me no discourtesy, but ever have I kept my vow to God that no kiss from my lips shall touch the hand of any earthly woman.'

.
 Nevertheless it befell that the Knight of the Blesséd Mary broke his vow.

Thus it chanced:

One day, in harvest time, he rode alone through a war-wasted, sun-parched land. By

the dusty roadside stood a ruined castle; in the half-opened doorway a woman sat solitary.

Her face was worn and thin and sad and white as beechwood ashes, her lips were colorless and chill, and her eyes were dim as with long watchings and many tears. She halted as she moved, and her hands were wasted as with famine fever. No fairness had she nor any grace.

The Knight of the Blesséd Mary asked of her water; she brought water to him in a broken crystal cup. She gave the cup into his hand and she took it from him again.

And a strange thought came to the heart of the knight.

‘Surely,’ he said within himself, ‘she has withered as a flower without sun, for to her love has done no homage.’

And the Knight of the Blesséd Mary bent him from his horse; he lifted her in his arms, and he kissed her once, yes, and twice. Then with no word he turned him from that threshold, and he rode from her.

Henceforth the woman’s eyes shone and her lips were young, and their color was as the color of a June rose. Men said who saw her

that it was as though a veil had fallen from her face. And so it was until she died.

.

But as the knight rode onwards he misdoubted him if he had done well.

‘Out of pity I have sinned,’ he said, and he was greatly troubled. At sundown he laid him down beneath a great tree, and when night came he slept uncomforted. In his sleep he dreamed a dream.

In that dream it seemed to him that he stood within the gates of Paradise, and full many a gay company of angels and of saints held high festival within the palace of Blesséd Mary.

At the door he saw a train of noble knights who entered in, and he saw how Blesséd Mary made each knight welcome there. And he asked :

‘Who are these who enter within the doors of Blesséd Mary?’

And an angel answered him :

‘Those are the knights who have kept their vows.’

Then his heart grew heavy and sad at that answer. Nevertheless, presently he looked again. He saw one solitary knight who came mourning and alone. And that solitary knight

went up the stair toward the palace door, and, behold, the Blesséd Mary herself came forth to meet him, and with her own hand she led him in.

And he asked and said:

‘Who is he, who is not as they who went before, — the solitary knight who came mourning and alone?’

And the angel answered him:

‘They who went before have entered in because they have kept their vows, but this man has entered in for that, out of pity, he broke his vow.’

Then the Knight of the Blesséd Mary wakened right merry, for he thought that solitary knight was himself.

V

BLACK SNOW

THE old name was extinct. It is well when an old name dies and carries its doom with it and the consciousness of fatality is broken in the silence of nameless heredity. The voiceless becomes synonymous with the forgotten.

But Ivette never forgot.

The name of her dead race was lost, but without and within her she bore the birth marks of her heritage.

Over the altar of the village church was a picture,—it was four generations old. The lady of the gray manor overlooking the sea-cliff had served the painter for his Madonna. Ivette had her amber-tinted hair, the same oval face with the slightly squared chin. That white woman of long ago had been very beautiful, more beautiful than it is well for a

woman to be. My lord had called her Black Snow, she was so cold and still and evil.

When she was dead there were three rings upon her hand. One was her marriage ring, one was the ring of her lover the painter, one was a new ring. They would have taken it from her, but my lord forbade. 'Bury her as she lived,' he said. And they buried her with three rings upon her finger. She was the first generation.

The baby she had borne had eyes with red lights in their blue darkness; they were changeful and stormy and free,—as the eyes of a wild bird are free. Her portrait hung in the gallery of the manor, of which, as Black Snow before her, she was lady in her own name and right. But it only hung there when my lord was dead. He said she was a vagabond's child. She wedded and was forsaken. She bore a child and died. The women of that race were short-lived; perhaps they had no care to outlive their joys. She was the second generation. Ivette had her eyes, and Ivette's walk was like hers, it was a gypsy's walk—her feet felt the ground and the ground her feet, and either loved the other. And the third generation was

Ivette's mother. With her the tradition of the race was lost. She had fled from the stern gray manor and from her father's rule. She had forfeited wealth, name, and heritage, for love of the young lover whose empty hands had held for her life's treasure.

Once she told little Ivette the story of her love.

'I could not live without him, little Ivette,' she said, 'and when he died I died.'

'But you are alive,' little Ivette answered her.

'Ah, sweetheart, no. What lives when the heart is dead, what day is left when the sun is set? Some day you will understand.'

Next morning Ivette took with her two wreaths of flowers, and laid them on the grave where her father slept in the graveyard of the sea village.

'Why two?' the old priest, who saw her, asked smiling.

'God killed one body but two hearts,' Ivette answered. Then she said, 'He should not have done it.'

That year Ivette's mother died also. God was sorry for what He had done and Ivette forgave Him.

One of her father's kindred, a king's courtier from a distant city, came when her mother was dead. To Ivette's eyes he was old; he had silver threads in his fair hair, he was very slight and his eyes were bright and blue.

'Why do you not cry?' he asked Ivette. 'She is dead.'

'She wanted it,' Ivette said slowly. And she would put no flowers on the grave where her father and mother lay. 'They have each other; they have no other need,' she said.

Ivette had her mother's mouth, with straight short lips dimpled in their deep corners as a child's are; they were the color of poppy scarlet. And Ivette was the fourth generation.

The king's courtier looked at the child, then he took her home with him to the city.

'I have brought you a child,' he told the old housekeeper who loved him as her son. She was pious and God-fearing; she took Ivette as the gift of God. She taught her all that a woman should learn, — to sew and to bake, to make the fine linen white and fragrant, to gather the fruits and to keep their sweetness and color through the winter months, and to extract the essence of herb and flower and leaf.

Round the house was a garden ; Ivette tended it. On Sundays the old woman took Ivette beyond the garden to worship God. And over and above what the old woman taught her, Ivette taught herself pride and humility, obedience and insurrection.

‘Ivette does not know how to do wrong,’ the old woman said, who loved her.

‘Then she had better learn,’ the king’s courtier answered.

He sent for Ivette one day. He looked at the small oval face, the slightness and the strength of the limbs, at the soft silent mouth with its weakness and its resoluteness, and at the dusky lonely eyes.

‘What do you want?’ he asked her.

Until he asked she had not known that she had wanted anything. Now she considered the possibility.

‘I will think and then I will tell you,’ she replied, pondering.

Later she came back to him.

‘I want a new god,’ she said.

‘Your need is rightly ordered : first a god, afterwards a worshipper,’ he made answer.

She waited ; his words seemed to her irrelevant to her demand.

A picture hung on the wall near by, — a picture of Apollo, the morning in his eyes and on his hair, his outstretched hand grasping the laurel stem where Daphne's last heart-beats throbbed.

'That was once a god,' said the king's courtier. 'It is written that he loved a woman. When he lost her he loved his godhead no more, — the burden of its immortality became his torture.'

.
'Quì vorrei
Per morir non esser Dio.'

Ivette listened and looked; yet she took little heed of his words.

'I want a god who is young and who is beautiful' — she was learning to define her need. 'The other — the wounds, the tears, the dying — hurts me.'

He regarded her attentively. Then he laughed.

'Every one must find their own god,' he said, 'but I will take you where gods are found.'

He took her.

'Let her wear what beautiful women wear,' he desired, and he was obeyed. They made her ready.

It was evening, — she waited in the quiet garden under the stars for him. Something seemed to throb from them to her. She held out her hand, she thought she could feel their light fall on it. She kissed a tall white columbine; it was like a leave-taking, she did not know why she had kissed it. ‘It will still be here to-morrow,’ she thought, yet her eyes filled with tears.

They called her and she went. The king’s courtier stood awaiting her. ‘Before you see the world see yourself!’ She looked into the tall mirror, framed in jewelled glass.

‘What do you see?’ he asked.

‘My mother’s face,’ she replied.

‘One must be many people before one is one’s self,’ he said, as he led her from the house.

They drove through the streets of the great city. Ivette pondered his words.

‘What is one’s self?’ she asked at last.

‘The canvas on which many pictures are painted; time wears away the surface of each in turn, to disclose the next beneath,’ was his reply.

Presently Ivette spoke again.

‘Is it far?’ she asked.

‘For you to go to-night? Yes, it is the longest street of all the world; it divides the known and the unknown.’

‘Does one only go down it once?’ she answered.

‘You know more than I guessed,’ he said. ‘When one begins to question one has begun to know. What do you know?’ he asked abruptly.

Slowly and thoughtfully she replied:

‘That there are many lives within me — I have lived but one. That there are many deaths, — the soul’s, the heart’s, the body’s —’ she paused.

‘And you have died none?’ he laughed.

‘One must live to die,’ she responded.

There was a mist like a dream in her eyes, — a dream of which her life-sleep was unconscious, and which was yet half a remembrance, and half a hope.

She surveyed her companion steadily, — the man her childhood had called old; his face grew a new face to her as she looked.

They had reached the palace. He led her through a gay crowd of men and of women, and many eyes dwelt upon her — she was very beautiful. There was dancing, a clamor of voices and laughter around. Then came a

hush, and in the hush the musicians played. As the shock of sound broke upon the silence Ivette's face whitened—it struck her heart. The first clash died into a wail,—her senses pursued the single sinking note, they stretched out their hands after it; for Ivette there was nothing left in the world save that dying, receding sound, herself, and the king's courtier.

Then the music broke forth anew, severing note from note in scattered chaos; it swept round her in circles, wild and free and gay and fierce; and her heart leapt out to dance with its measure, to laugh with its laughter, to strike with its fierceness. But beneath the freedom and the merriment, there was something hidden, something illusive, something she strove in vain to grasp; it was a life which surged like a shimmering sea of fire, it tangled netted flames about her in a web, and drew her down into its depths. It evoked strange images; they flitted before her eyes, till again these formless images gave place to a vacancy, and beyond the vacancy she was still conscious of that same evasive life, stronger than madness, or joy, or hate, yet nameless and unknown, a gladness and a fear.

The music ended.

‘You have heard the voice of a new god,’ the king’s courtier told her.

Ivette bowed her head.

‘I worship him,’ she murmured.

.
The night was passing, the dawn crept over the gray roofs of the city as they went homeward. Then once more they stood upon the threshold of his home. They crossed it.

‘Is it well with you?’ he asked.

Her face was still pale with the pallor of the music’s fever, her eyes had the wondering wistfulness of a great surprise.

‘What more would you?’ He smiled at her mute bewilderment, the dumbness of her life’s startled awakening.

‘I do not know,’ she said.

‘I could not live without him, little Ivette.’ Why did the long-forgotten words of her dead mother ring in her memory? ‘Some day you will understand.’

‘I do not know,’ she repeated a second time. Her ignorance stood on the brink of knowledge.

The eyes of the king’s courtier laughed; he stooped and kissed her.

‘Learn,’ he said, jesting.

For one short moment’s space she clung to him. Blinder than blindness, more helpless than sleep, she outstretched her hands for shelter, and sought for her weakness the refuge of his strength. For one moment only, then her whole life rose in mutiny against that surrender. She had found the god she had demanded, but against his power her heart made insurrection. Before the sun rose above the city Ivette had fled from the home of her childhood, fled without farewell, without leave-taking, from the world of that new thralldom of worship.

‘I will be free,’ she said, ‘I will be free under God’s heaven, — free and forget.’

.
In the peasant home which had been her childhood’s, Ivette dwelt once more, — dwelt as a peasant amongst peasants. She toiled with her hands for bread amongst the village women, and the trammelled life of the city lay behind her like a pale dream. The sun and the salt sea winds changed the amber of her hair, it caught new tints of light and of shade, her hands and her feet grew brown as oak leaves

in winter. The earth was strong and beautiful and she loved it, loved it all, — the purple sea of the heather and the blue sea of the waves, and the swiftness of the sea gulls' flight, and the hundred-toned voices of the great winds, and the little flowers, and the grass blades, the health and the grace of nature's unfettered growths, — she loved them all; the sense of their touch, their movements, their colors, their fragrances, linked her life with their life in a fellowship of silent emotion.

Once only the king's courtier sought and spoke with her.

‘Come back,’ he said to her.

And she answered:

‘I will not come back.’

‘Wherefore?’ he asked.

‘Lest I become the bondswoman of my love,’ she answered. ‘It hurt me.’

‘Freedom too may have its wounds,’ he answered. ‘What then will you seek?’

She did not answer.

‘You will come back,’ he told her. But the days passed on and she did not go back.

‘I have forgotten; I am free,’ she told herself.

The freedom of the wide horizons of moor and sea and sky seemed to become incorporate with her, her life grew its wings. She recalled the city, the walled gardens, the bonds of daily custom, as a man recalls the malady of captivity. One remembrance alone she kept in exile from the kingdom of her mind, — it was the memory of the love which she told herself she had overcome, the memory of the new god whom she had demanded and sought, whom she had found, had for one brief moment worshipped, and from whose servitude she had forever fled. Of that god, of that worship, she would suffer no remembrance. But it is not the foes men have vanquished whom they keep in banishment it is not against the dead the city gates are barred.

.

Above the sea village and the inland fields rose the gray wall of the old manor of Ivette's obliterated race. A stranger and an alien held the heritage her mother had forfeited.

'The lands are his, but the blood is Ivette's,' the elder peasant women in the village said, when Ivette came to dwell within sight of those gray walls. The traditions of past days lived

in their memories. 'Black Snow was buried with three rings upon her hand, and one ring was a gypsy's ring; her child had the eyes of a vagabond, and she was the mother of Ivette's mother,' they would add, as Ivette passed by with her swift, unhurried walk, and the lithe strength of her slight limbs. And they would say, 'Ivette is of the old race; she will not stay among us, she walks as a wanderer walks.'

But Ivette stayed. She was happy. She would lie on the rocks with closed eyes to let the sun rays burn on the shut lids; she would let the soft sea waves float against her bare feet as the cool tide rose in the water-pools; and when summer was over and harvest was come, she labored in the fields with the girls and women from sunrise till sunset.

The alien master of the manor and the lands saw her, and he saw that she was beautiful.

'Who is she?' he asked the reapers, and they told him.

He paid them with gold; the gold bought their suspicions. They spoke of it one to the another and they grew to doubt Ivette. Ivette was ignorant of their doubt.

One day the master of the manor came to

Ivette. He told her that the picture of her mother's mother hung in the gallery among the pictures of the dead men and women of her lineage; he told her to come and see it, and in it to see herself. And Ivette went with him; she knew no fear. When he saw her beside the portrait he said:

‘You are more beautiful than she.’ And he said, ‘For love's sake your mother lost the heritage of her home, — for love's sake come back to the home she lost.’

Ivette looked at him with the fierce innocence of her dusky blue eyes.

‘Love,’ she said, ‘poor Love, what has he done that in his name men daily do sacrilege?’

The master of the manor laughed and let her go. He was evil and strong.

‘You are not wise. One day you will crave what to-day you scorn,’ he told her.

In the village men smiled and women whispered as they saw her go by, but Ivette did not see their smiles nor hear their whisperings.

Autumn's red scars were bleeding upon the earth, the barren purple of the moors faded into russet-brown, the fields were reaped and

bare. In the village there was a great fair. It lasted three days and three nights. There were pedlers from many lands, vagabond vendors of many wares; there were mountebanks and strolling musicians, and the small fires of wandering gypsies burnt by the roadside or made living spots of redness along the shore beneath the shelter of the high cliff. Here and there were horses tethered by heaps of hay upon the sand or browsing at large on the turf which bordered the highroad; vagrant groups of men, and women with brown-faced babies, slept and ate and lived under the blaze of the blue sky, and beneath the orange twilight of the hot harvest moon. The village peasants danced and sang and drank and bought and sold and quarrelled and fought throughout the day.

The last night of the fair, the boys and the girls waked out the night.

In her small white-walled room Ivette strove in vain to sleep. All day long the tumult of revelry had sounded in her ears; she had fled from it, but it had pursued her even to the free solitude of the wide moors. It came to her now through the night, a surging clamor of voices

and laughter and passing feet. She looked down. From the window she could see between roof and roof, the space of open ground, fringed at the far edge with sedge plants and dry sea grass, which, with slanting cliffs on either side, sloped gently down to the sea-beach of sand and parching seaweed. There, in the smoky glare of torch and bonfire, the crowd surged to and fro. And beyond the crowd and beyond the glare, the silver-blueness of the smooth sea slept beneath a fading yellow moon. From time to time a dark fishing boat crossed the moon-track, here and there along the sea line a solitary camp-fire burnt ruddily. The sea was all silence and the land was all uproar.

A fever burnt in Ivette's veins, a craving for movement possessed her. She too would mingle with the throng, hear the wild songs, dance the wild dances. What should hinder her? She was free and she had forgotten. Why, this night of nights, did the wounding of the god she had once sought bleed afresh at her heart, and his bondage rebind its fetters around her memory?

She went out into the night, she listened to

the shrill cries, to the music and the songs, and the beat of the dancers' feet upon the trodden earth. It was like the glamour of a fantastic dream, a familiar scene transfigured into a mad grotesque.

She drew closer and closer, the circles of dancers eddied round and round; the current enclosed her, it swept her away; the measure of the music quickened, then suddenly a strong arm held her fast; the dancers danced on, but she stood outside the circle, and the master of the manor was by her.

'Dance with me or I will kiss you before them all,' he said.

'If you kissed my feet I would burn the mark off,' she cried fiercely.

An old woman stood near by.

Ivette turned to her.

'You hear me,' she said.

'You should not have entered, or you should not have come back from within his doors. If you had not gone we should have believed no evil, if you had not returned we should have dared say none; now it is too late,' the old peasant muttered as with shuffling feet she retreated into the crowd.

Ivette saw the woman's squalid thought, the first coarse breath of slander had touched her; it scorched her. In the verdict of one she read the sentence of all.

‘You hear; be wise.’

The master of the manor laid his hand upon her, but in that moment's space a gypsy's figure, detached from the press, shadowed itself, gaunt and strong, against the red light. There was the gleam of a knife, the sound of a blow. Her hand was free from the hand that grasped it, her dress was stained and wet. The master of the manor lay silent upon the trampled ground.

‘Hush, little sister, have no fear, dance on, dance on.’

Once more she was borne into the circle of dancers, and the dance was mad, and the dancers blind, and the bonfires were dying, and the moon was gone, and Ivette danced on, with the stain of red upon her breast, and one amongst the revellers, unseen in the smouldering torch-light, slept sound.

Before the day dawned the gypsies were vanished from the sea village and Ivette with them.

‘You are our sister, your voice is as our voices, your walk as our walk — come with us,’ they bade her. But Ivette left them. With her she took a gift, their secret, the secret of the gypsies, the seed of death which grows upon the ripe barley.

.

She took her way toward the far-off city; once again she stood in the quiet silence of the room where the pictured god bewailed his immortality. ‘I am stronger than he,’ Ivette said to herself, for she held the gift the gypsies had given her hidden at her breast.

‘You have come home,’ said the king’s courtier.

‘They slandered me and it hurt,’ she answered.

‘I knew it,’ he told her. Then he asked, ‘And after?’

She told him all.

‘What has your freedom taught you?’

She paused before she answered him. ‘That there are many bondages, but that there is one freedom,’ she replied at length; ‘that it is well to sleep above the heather; but that it is better to sleep under it; that life is a prison, but that

God has left us the key. I have come to say good-by.'

'Wait,' he said.

'I will not wait,' she answered him. 'Life broke two hearts, the heart of my mother and the heart of my mother's mother. As with them so will it deal with me; I bear the birth-mark of my heritage.'

'There is another heritage you hold. Hers whose picture hangs in the chapel. She kept her heart unbroken.'

'She was wicked,' said Ivette.

'You may still have that chance. Would you take it?' he demanded.

'I do not know,' she said, doubting.

'Then wait and see.'

He took her in his arms. As once before, blindness fell on her, the blindness of the blind, and helplessness, the helplessness of sleep. This time it did not hurt her.

'What do you want now?' he said.

And she answered, 'Nothing.'

.

'He loves me and I him,' Ivette told the old woman who loved both.

'He loved a woman once; he loves her still,

you have no place in his heart,' the old woman said, her brows darkening.

Ivette laughed softly.

'I am happy,' she murmured.

The old woman sought him.

'You do not love her,' she repeated.

'But she does not know the difference; let her dream she is happy,' he replied.

One day Ivette learnt the difference; a dream is a frail shield for the heart of a woman — and her dream broke.

'You give all and you withhold all,' she said to him one day, and he was silent.

She withdrew herself from his caresses. Never again did she lift her face to his kisses. 'They hurt me,' she said.

'A woman should yield, not give,' she added, pondering. 'I gave with both hands. Now every memory bleeds.'

'Even memories bleed to death,' he answered her. 'It will not hurt forever. One day love will remint his coins, and a new name will be stamped upon them.'

She did not speak.

'Other women have grieved with a like grief,' he continued, 'and their tears are dry.'

‘Ah,’ she cried swiftly, ‘it is not the grief that makes the woman, it is the woman who makes the grief.’

And he knew it. Ivette had shaped her own sorrow — its greatness was the greatness of her womanhood ; she would not have it otherwise. The brown faded from her face and from her hands, her eyelids showed the curves of their deep setting, and she shrank from the man she loved. The past and the future were as an abyss on either side her heart ; and of both she was dispossessed. A man, it is written, shall leave father and mother and cleave unto his wife. A woman must do more, — she must leave herself likewise. To herself she was as nothing except in so far as she was his, and she was his no more, for love alone can possess love.

Her kisses, the gifts of love, which, with the proud initiative of absolute surrender, she had bestowed upon him, haunted her dreams with upbraidings and reproaches. ‘What had we done that you should have stained us with the touch of lips where love was not ?’ they demanded, clamoring for the atonement of the irrevocable, and the shadow of guilt seemed to attach itself to her lost joy’s innocence.

The king's courtier watched her. What remedy would she seek for her foregone happiness? The days passed by, one by one, and she sought none. Yet — 'It is not well for a woman to have found life's alternative,' he said to himself as he watched. And Ivette had found it.

At length a change came. She sought him. She was very white, and a dull terror had printed itself upon her face.

'My pain is gone,' she said, stretching out her hands to him as in the first love-hours of her happiness. 'Day by day it grows more blunt — the edge that wounded — day by day — day by day, and to-day I feel no pain.'

'Of what are you afraid?' he said, smiling.

She looked at him with the eyes which had seen heaven and hell.

'I do not know,' she answered.

'When you know, tell me,' he said lightly. 'And — be happy.'

When she knew she told him.

'It has come. I know the face of my fear,' she said. 'To-day I passed two men who talked together in the street. Again, they, loitering, crossed my path. "Such a face I

have sought far and wide," one said, "for my Madonna that I would paint; it is so soft and so cold!" and it was of me he spoke.'

Then Ivette cried:

'I am innocent. But her guilt will grow within my heart, — the guilt of that dead woman whose face has come to life in my face. Help me!' she implored.

'Help you — to what?' he asked.

'To keep my love and to keep my suffering, help me to love you.'

He set her aside.

'Be wise,' he said, 'and be happy, and let love go.'

She stood a little way removed from him. He had denied her prayer. The love and the pain which flickered at her heart must die. For a while she waited there — her face covered from the light. No second appeal came from her lips — the peace of the irreparable was closing round her.

At length she moved. She crept back softly to his side, like a ghost of her lost self; he saw her face as she raised it to his; the wistful passion of her dead mother's soul, the patient surrender of her mother's love-worship, had re-

printed itself in that brief moment upon Ivette's features.

‘I have loved you,’ she said. ‘Kiss me once — once only — as you would have kissed me if I had been the woman whom you loved.’

He bent and took her in his arms.

She rested in them, smiling. Her distress had fallen from her, fear and terror were passed away. Those bygone days with their unsatisfied hunger for a God to serve, for a man to worship, had lost all power to hurt; the future with its blankness — when love and grief should be extinct within her, when her heart should have grown cold and evil as the heart of that pale pictured woman above the village altar — had lost power to make her afraid.

Life was a prison, but she held the key. Free among the dead! Truly, free among the living might no man be. With shut eyes, the wide horizons of sky and sea and moor opened before her, the boundless distances of air and of sunlight and starlight came back to her, — breadths without measure, heights and depths surpassing imagination, — and beyond them opened a horizon yet wider, a yet more illimitable vista, a distance by which all other dis-

tances were as nothing. The cramped city, the narrow streets, the walled rooms, — these taught death's fear, but to her whose eyes had been heavy with love of earth's great spaces of sea waves and heather, death's infinity seemed but an extension of life's extremest enfranchisement.

. 'quì vorrei
Per morir non esser Dio.'

She lifted herself slowly from her resting-place, — her strife with life was ended, her wound was healed, her truce was signed. The king's courtier watched her silently — he was very patient.

She laid her arms quietly round him.

'Kiss me once more,' she whispered.

Then she unloosed her clasp and went from him.

.
Early next day they summoned him.

'She is dead,' so the old woman who had loved her told him. 'Now you will weep for her.'

He entered the room where she lay upon her bed, — her face white upon whiteness. He looked down upon the closed lids and the dumb lips, and he said no word.

‘ Now you will weep for her,’ the old woman repeated bitterly ; she was gray with years, but her heart had no wrinkles. ‘ You will weep now. She is dead.’

He shook his head.

‘ She wanted it,’ he said.

VI

SEED OF THE SUN

‘WE sell our score, but she her threescore,’ the other flower-sellers in the market-place said of the flower-girl whose name was Raël. ‘Fortune’s sun shines on her.’

But a day came when for Raël fortune’s sun set.

It was spring. Raël loitered on her homeward way through the gay streets of the old city. She watched the fountain; its drops were jewelled with western lights of amber and rose-color; she lingered by the open gate of a great garden wood, where the narcissus blossoms starred the ground under the myrtle-trees, and then she passed on beneath the shadows of great houses, on towards the streets where the poor people dwelt.

Near by her home was a ruined court; at one side of it was a shrine, where a pale Madonna looked down from her moss-grown niche. In the midst of the court was the statue of a lost god. Raël did not know either his name or his godhead, but the statue she loved. Its face was so gray and mutilated that it seemed to her nothing could be older, yet its open lips were so young that it seemed to her nothing could be younger. All other youth was as age beside it.

Raël entered the court; she climbed upon a broken ledge near by the statue's pedestal, and she put her bluest violets one by one amongst its curls. Then she laughed softly and went singing on her way.

A flight of stone stairs led upwards to the little room which was her home; she could see them from the farther end of the straight narrow street. At the foot of the stairway a man clad in rags was sitting. As she came near he rose and met her; she thought he was a beggar, but he did not beg of her. He stretched out his hand to her; in it lay a small seed, the size of a bean seed, brown and shrivelled.

'To him that hath shall be given,' he said.

‘You have youth and innocence and joy and hope — I bring you a gift.’ He laid the brown seed in her hand. ‘Plant it and water it and let the sun shine upon it, cherish and tend it, and it will germinate and grow, yet its life will not come from the water-drops nor yet from the sunshine. When it is grown it will put forth strange leaves, and the leaves you will see; and one day it will blossom, but the blossom you will not see.’

He waited for no answer, but passed swiftly from her sight.

Raël looked at the beggar’s gift; she touched it with the finger of her right hand, doubtful and wondering. Then she took it home with her.

Next morning she wakened early; she rose and she looked again at the seed. It was so parched and dead that it seemed a husk and no seed.

She sought the house of an old physician; he knew many things and he had many books, and in his garden many strange and rare and health-giving herbs flourished and blossomed. Daily to him Raël brought her freshest spring flowers.

‘Give me, I pray you,’ now she asked him, ‘a

pot and earth wherewith to fill it, that in it I may plant the seed to which I would give life.'

And she said:

'Of what plant is the seed?'

She unclosed her hand that she might show the seed to him; as it lay in her palm it appeared to her that the brown was less withered.

'I do not know,' the old man said.

He searched many books, but though they told of many seeds, of this seed they told nothing.

He gave Raël the pot and the earth to fill it with, and she planted the seed and set it in her window, and watered it. When that evening she came back from the market-place, it seemed to her that the little white-walled room was no longer empty. That night she dreamt that beneath the earth the seed had broken its husk. Waking, she felt that she was no more solitary — and she was glad.

The days passed. In the city, amongst her companions, Raël was lonely; by night she was no longer alone, the beggar's gift was with her. Once at midnight she started from her sleep, she thought some one had called her by name.

Next morning at dawn the crust of the earth which filled the pot was cracked; above its surface was a small red-tipped sheath, the first sheath-leaf of the fertilized seed. Raël leant over it, her breath touched it; the chill of winter was in the gray daybreak, and she shivered, then a great faintness stole over her for joy that the plant was born.

That day she counted the hours as she sat in the market-place — each hour seemed a whole day's length — until evening came. Her eyes were like mist with the sun behind it; the malady of her joy had left its mark.

‘What has befallen her?’ her companions questioned. But Raël was silent.

At sundown she hastened homeward, the little shut sheath was there; she watered it, and then she slept the sleep of troubled happiness. In the morning a seam showed itself in the sheath; the night following, the seam split and the stem raised itself, and afterwards two leaves came, one on either side, and the plant grew, yet it was only in the night that it grew. Raël recalled the beggar's words, ‘not of the raindrops nor yet of the sunshine should its life spring forth.’ She pondered them.

The summer heat had stolen the red from her lips; in the market the buyers passed her without buying.

But the plant flourished and grew. One day the old physician stopped her in the street. It was long since she had seen him.

‘How fares it with the seed?’ he asked.

‘It sprouted and is green — the stem bears many leaves,’ she answered him.

‘I will come and see it,’ he said, ‘that I may know its name.’

He came and he looked upon the plant, yet its name he could not tell. The leaf was not grown in his garden nor engraved in his books.

He looked upon Raël.

‘Beware,’ he said. ‘There are herbs which are for health-giving — there are also herbs which breathe out strange maladies.’

When he was gone, Raël stood and watched the veined leaves in the sunshine; they were strong and young, very strong and very young. She touched them with her hands, which were languid and thin, and the leaves were warm with the sun and her hands were chill. A terror grew in her heart, a great gray fear, and her terror and fear were of the plant she had planted.

‘I will fly from it,’ she said.

She fled — fled from the city out into the plains beyond the city, and beyond the plains to the blue sea. Her feet were wet with the dew of grasses, her lips were fanned by the sea-wind, and soft sea-mists were on her hair, but the fever-dream dreamt on at her heart, and the dream was of the plant.

‘To-day it will fade,’ she said the first morning. And the next day she said, ‘It dies.’

And its dying was her anguish.

‘Maybe it is already dead,’ she told herself; ‘I will return and see.’

So she returned — up the narrow street she went with ever-quickenings steps, up the steep stair with panting breath, and at her heart a hope and a despair.

The stem drooped, the green leaves were discolored. Raël bathed them with her tears, and the stem lifted itself and the leaves revived.

After that Raël left it no more. In the market-place her seat was empty.

‘When I am absent it is alone,’ she cried.

Poverty came to her; she begged for bread in the street.

‘She has grown a poison-plant,’ her com-

panions said, and they shrank from her; she was very pale, her face was like a shadow that fades, but the line of her straight lips was like the color of a geranium flower.

A day came when bread itself failed. That day a stranger sought the narrow street where she lived. The fame of that strange plant had reached his ears. By the window stood the plant, beside it Raël sat silent; hunger shadowed her eyes, her small feet were bare on the stones, and her gown was ragged.

‘Sell to me,’ said the stranger. ‘For the plant that you have grown I will give much gold — even the price of a king’s ransom. Hunger you shall know no more, nor poverty, nor any labor, and the stones of the street shall forget the touch of your feet.’

Raël lifted her head and smiled.

‘I will not sell one single leaf of its blossoming,’ she answered.

Nor would she listen to any entreating. And the plant still grew. It bore one bud, a close-furled bud. All day long Raël tended and watched it. Presently a narrow streak of a nameless rose color showed through the sheath of the bud.

Autumn had come, hot and breathless and feverish. The old physician climbed the stair. He stood by Raël.

‘It feeds upon thy life,’ he said. ‘Come from it or cast it forth.’

‘Go from it I cannot. I went and I returned. Cast it forth I will not,’ she answered.

‘Listen,’ he spoke once more, ‘and choose. Its health is your malady, its strength your faintness. Break the stem, let the root wither and parch. It lives of your dying, its blossom will be born of your death.’

Then he said:

‘It is ill to die in life’s April.’

He left her.

To die in life’s spring!

The old man’s words echoed on in her ears through the hours of the long afternoon.

To die — she or it. One must slay the other or be slain.

Day by day, hour by hour, it was stealing the color from her face, the strength from her hands, the food from her lips, the blood from her veins. It was her enemy, her antagonist. There it was with the fair strong leaves and the straight stalk, and the folded

bud with the scarlet thread of the blossom within, waiting, struggling, panting to be free. She looked at it; it seemed to watch her, and soon it would strike her with the death-wound of its first blossoming. The mutiny of life stirred within her; she would live and not die!

In the small still room the two adversaries were alone together — between them was a combat, a silent, unequal combat.

Go from it! She had gone and had returned. Sell it! No: though breast and brow and lips were printed with hunger. Cast it forth — break the stem, let the root wither!

She looked at her wasted hands. If they tore the plant, would it cry? would the leaves wail if she cast them forth?

It must blossom or it must die. Was there no compromise with death, no middle road for her or for it?

The leaves of the plant shone green as emerald in the red sunset. Before the morning came the bud must be broken, or — it must blossom. There was no compromise with death.

She turned from it and lay upon her couch with hidden face. And the tide of the battle ebbed and flowed. Life was fair and life's desire quickened within her. A bird sang. She heard the beat of flying wings, and remembrance of old days awakened, of days when the seed was not, and the whole earth was very glad to her. And the world was still beautiful, and it was very great. Sky after sky would redden as it reddened now, and April would come and violets would come, and anemones and yellow crocuses. A hundred plants would spring, although that one plant of all plants lay dead in the dry street dust; a hundred blossoms would blossom although that one blossom of all earth's blossomings had never broken its bud.

Were there no other joys, save the joy of its verdure, no other loves with which she could love, was there nothing else in all the world for her save that one plant? Her lips answered her 'yes,' but her heart answered her, 'nothing.' She raised herself on her arm, the gold dusk of the twilight dazzled her, the plant was dark against it. The combat was keen, and it was a mortal combat. She looked through the

yellow haze to trace the outline of each leaf — the leaves that must die !

And after? After the battle, when the strife was over and her antagonist was slain? When the leaf to which her breath had given life, her tears, rain — when the bud which had been born of her nearness — were rent from their stem?

The tints of sunset faded, her heart sickened and failed her. The tide of the contest turned in the balance. How beautiful it was, — this child of her cherishing, this life of her life, this sweetness of her upbringing! And was it such a great matter to be slain of its slaying?

A new languor stole over her limb by limb; it weighed softly on her eyelids — in it was something of the imprisoning sweetness of sleep — it seemed to her as though it were the advance guard of death. Fear fell from her. Was this all?

Dusk was gone. In its place night — a translucent night without darkness — was come, and in the night the plant was drawing her to it, drawing and drawing and drawing her to its side. She felt it through the breathless stillness of that gray light — it called her — it

wanted her — its need was her compulsion. She rose, as a sleepwalker rises; with slow, pausing feet she crossed the little room.

‘I am coming,’ she said softly. ‘I come.’ She saw the small square of the starred sky set in the whiteness of the wall, and the window’s ledge, and the earthen pot, and the one bud where the scarlet blossom struggled to break free. It was waiting for her, waiting for the nativity of her kiss. Raël knelt beside it. She lifted her hands to caress the leaves she had tended, she lifted her face to the bud she had cherished, then with shut eyes she kissed the bud with her lips.

And in the dawn the blossom of the plant broke like the flame of the sunrise. But the blossom Raël did not see.

‘Bury it with her,’ the old physician bade them when they made ready to carry her to her grave.

And he laid the scarlet blossom on her breast, and the root he cast forth to die.

VII

THE KING'S MOUNTEBANK

IT was summer. The wheat-fields on either side the highroad were yellow with deep corn; poppies and cornflowers, the orange of rank marigolds and the streaked purple-pink of mallows tinted the hedgerow banks; the world was as gay as a child's garden.

And the King's Mountebank stood by the wayside where the sunburnt grass was frosted with dust, where the honeysuckle clambered into the flowering elder bushes. He was tall, his hands were long and narrow, and the veins on them showed like blue twisted cords, a mask covered his brows. Below the mask the outline of the cheek was wasted and haggard, the lips fevered and exhausted, his eyes were brilliant and restless. The brown tangle of his hair fell over the mask; his cap, with its long

red feather, lay on the turf at his feet, his dress was frayed, ragged, and tattered; the tones of his voice were broken and low, but they had the fierceness of the note of a bird of prey, and in the pause between word and word the silence seemed as though it were but the space left for the sound of a blow. His songs were songs of mocking, and every jest had a knife at its heart.

The little crowd of village peasants grouped by the roadway inn laughed and listened, and some few women clustered by the open door, watching and whispering.

My Lady Mavis, my lord's little daughter, lingered as she went by. Overhead, the black rooks flew homeward to the elm-tree avenue of my lord's manor. The King's Mountebank caught and repeated their harsh cry. The song of a lark quivered, for a moment, in the sun-blue air, and a hawk's scream answered it.

Then both were silent, and the women by the tavern door were silent also.

'I am afraid,' little yellow-haired Barbara — whose home was the roadway inn — cried, weeping, as she clung to my lady's hand. 'His mask makes me afraid.' My Lady Mavis

was scarcely older than her frightened play-fellow. But she soothed Barbara's fears.

'Beneath his mask he is beautiful,' she said very softly.

He was so near beside them.

His eyes met the eyes of my Lady Mavis, they went like an arrow to its mark. He had heard her words. She lifted her hands to shut his eyes away from her. To have raised a defence is to have felt a danger. He saw her raised hands, and he laughed as she passed him by.

'My lady too was afraid,' little Barbara told her mother that night. 'She too was afraid.'

My Lady Mavis had eyes like blue hyacinths; her skin was very white, with scarlet flushes which came and went. She was very gay; sorrow was a great surprise to her — afterwards the surprise would have been joy.

At home in her sleeping chamber she dreamt of the player-vagabond whose eyes had met her eyes. She dreamt, and she saw him in her dream, no longer near at hand, but far, far off. Saw him as she had seen him, jeering, haggard, ragged, but from his face the mask was gone. She would have drawn near to look upon his uncovered features, for by reason of the great

distance she could not rightly discern them. And she drew near; and when she was near, the mask was there. And the mask was a terror to her, and she cried, 'Uncover your face,' but he scoffed and answered, 'I am not beautiful.' Then the distance came back between them, and the distance was even greater than before, but the mask seemed as if it were gone, albeit because of the distance the face was hidden. And thus her dream repeated itself, and when she wakened her dream had eaten its way into her life.

When Christmas approached, my lord went to the city to observe the festival, and my Lady Mavis with him. It was the first time, summer or snowtime, that her home fields had lost the track of her feet. They missed it.

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It was Christmas Eve. My Lady Mavis went through the crowded streets to hear the midnight Mass at the great church. The stars that night shone like the spear points of white lances — a legion of winged warriors were ambushed behind them in the darkness.

She entered the church; within was warmth and the yellow illumination of taper and torch

and lamp and the mist of incense. The Mass was sung. She heard it as if from a distance. Only its refrain of eternity dwelt in her mind. *Sæcula sæculorum. Sæcula sæculorum* — again and again the words repeated themselves. ‘And the little is as eternal as the great—it leaves its mark forever and ever and ever,’ the priest told them that night.

And a mark was on her life, a mark of eyes which had met her eyes, of a laugh which had derided her fear with mockery.

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The Mass was over—men and women thronged around, passing from shrine to shrine, from altar to altar. The deep bells pealed above—God was born.

My Lady Mavis delayed. She waited, but for what she waited she did not know. A blind need held her.

Near at hand a solitary woman was kneeling in a deserted chapel. My Lady Mavis came close beside her. The chapel was quiet and empty.

‘God has found a mother, but I, O God, have found no child.’

My lady caught the broken cry of barren

sorrow. She bent her face to the face of that pale suppliant — a swift fellowship of sterile womanhood stirred within her — and her childhood died, and yet her need was blind.

‘I — I do not understand,’ she cried to the woman.

The woman raised her head and looked into the fair white face beside her.

‘One day you will know. Ah, pray to God. Pray thus, “Give me to-day bread — to-morrow it will be too late.” For me,’ she added, with sudden mournful passion, ‘for me to-morrow is come.’

She rose hastily and fled. In her place a band of men came by between pillar and pillar.

‘The King’s mummers,’ some one said in the press which thronged around.

My Lady Mavis turned and he was there. And she knew that she had known he would be there, and she knew that it had been for his coming she had waited. Now he was so near that his hand outstretched would have touched her hand. His companions pressed closely around him; he was their leader and master, his dress was no longer the frayed and tattered dress of a vagabond, it was blue

and glittered with silver. Only his heart still wore its rags.

He spoke, and my lady heard the loud sacrilege of his jest. She saw above and beneath the mask the wasted outline of cheek and brow, the jaded eyes and the fevered lips. At his reckless laughter in that holy place the crowd shrank from him afraid. An old priest passing paused with stern rebuke.

‘But for the fool’s livery which cloaks your sins a hundred shafts would have struck your heart,’ the priest cried, confronting him, — ‘if indeed death itself were not ashamed to hold so vile a thing.’

The King’s Mountebank raised his hand with a fierce menace. Then he let it fall. Between him and the priest my Lady Mavis stood.

‘Father,’ she pleaded, ‘his lips jeer but his soul worships.’

The King’s Mountebank laughed low.

‘Brave faith, little heart,’ he said slowly, and the violence faded from his eyes and the line of his lips changed. Then he had gone his way, and the mummers followed in his track, and the crowd moved after them, and in the deserted chapel my Lady Mavis and the priest were left solitary.

‘I love him,’ my lady murmured, ‘I love him.’

The apocalypse, of which a woman's heart is the chief apostle, lay, an open vision, before her eyes. The interpretation was known to her. She loved, and it was the King's Mountebank who held her heart in his hand.

The old man's eyes were filled with a great compassion.

‘So every woman brings her box of spike-nard — very precious,’ he said sadly. ‘But how seldom, alas, is it upon the feet of a Christ that it is broken.’

She did not hear his voice; she was unconscious of his pity. She had touched the extreme of life — beyond which is the infinite. Slowly she went forth from the chapel and the priest was alone.

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The Christmas masque was over in the palace. In the player's dress of his calling, the King's Mountebank stood in the starlight dusk of a small bare room, and my Lady Mavis was with him.,

Lost in the mazes of stair and corridor she had missed her way. Seeking to retrace her

bewildered steps she had crossed the silent threshold of that sequestered chamber, where through the tall dark window, set in the whiteness of the wall, the night looked in to see. And he was there, and the spangles of his dress gleamed and shone and sparkled.

‘I have lost my way,’ she cried under her breath.

At her voice he turned towards her.

‘So have we all,’ he said harshly. And then he added, ‘You are afraid.’

‘I am not afraid,’ she cried, with quick denial. ‘Why should I fear?’

He made no reply.

‘I am not afraid,’ she repeated.

He laughed. He took her small hands in his hand—they trembled.

‘Deceivers and yet true,’ he quoted. ‘So rightly was it written of all women.’

Her eyes sought his covered face. His words only dimly reached her brain. Suddenly it seemed to her that the whole world had contracted itself into that narrow space where between wall and wall he and she were together, — once if for once only, — together alone. She saw the glitter of the tinsel stars upon his

breast, the shadowed darkness of his hair, the veins of the strong, haggard hands — she saw all and beyond all. Beneath his mask he was beautiful, beneath his sins he was good. An instinct, an impulse, which swept all fear, all memory, all doubt away, took possession of her; it said to her ‘Speak,’ and she spoke, all other thoughts annihilated in that supreme oblivion. ‘Uncover your face,’ she cried, ‘uncover your face.’

For a moment he mutely listened, trammelled and dumb in the surprise of that imperative demand. She waited; once more the words of that kneeling woman vibrated in her ears: ‘Give bread to-day — to-morrow is ever too late.’ Thus would it be with her. This was her to-day, this was the hour given into her hands to win or to lose, — to break through the bar which severed life from life and heart from heart. To-morrow the mask which lay upon those hidden features would forever cover his face from her sight, to-morrow the mask of unknown sin which lay upon his soul would be riveted there forever.

The stress of a love which was pity, and of a pity which was love, was upon her.

She bent her face to his hands, she kissed them again and again.

‘Uncover your face,’ she pleaded.

Still he paused — his grasp tightened and closed upon her.

‘What is it to you?’ he said.

‘It is all in all,’ she answered.

Unfearing she lifted her eyes to his. She divined his wonder, she guessed somewhat of the deep ignorance which is the fruit of a man’s knowledge. Her pride, unwounded and unashamed, made answer to that ignorance. ‘Royalty,’ she said, ‘gives.’

His clasp relaxed, his fingers rested on hers, as a woman’s hand on a child’s cheek.

‘You do not know what you are giving,’ he answered.

A slow smile of security crept to her lips. The words were harsh.

‘But your hands are gentle,’ she whispered, with caressing confidence.

A silence fell between them, the ebb and the flow of fate alternated in the darkness around. The chill air of the winter night grew fragrant as with the sun-warmed sweetness of spring’s greenest blossoming. Those weak white

hands were forcing their way through the iron bulwarks of his life. He broke the silence.

‘God in heaven,’ he cried vehemently, ‘must I withhold —’

She did not heed the broken sentence. ‘Love me a little,’ she entreated, still with that faint smile which he could not see.

‘Love!’ he repeated fiercely. ‘Yes, as the bird of prey loves. What it cannot shelter beneath its wings it rends and tears.’

His gentleness was gone. Between her and him the bar of severance had once more fallen — the mask was upon his face and upon his soul. But his kisses were sealed upon her lips — *sæcula sæculorum*.

‘God, whom I love, I love him more,’ she wept, as she knelt sobbing beside her bed that night.

After that she prayed to God no more; she had but one need, and that need God knew. She had nothing else to tell Him.

The season of the festival went by. Day by day in the busy city streets, in the thronged corridors of palace and court, my Lady Mavis saw the King’s Mountebank pass her by. No

look of his eyes ever dwelt on her face, no tone of his voice ever recognized her presence. He had thrust her aside from his life. Amongst the boisterous companies of players and mummers and maskers she saw his figure, she listened to his songs which jeered, to his laughter which stung; and his jests and his mockings had the poison of venomous snakes.

At length the last night of the Christmas feast had come, — the last night of her sojourn in the city.

That night for one moment he stood beside her where in a gay crowd the King's maskers mingled with the guests in the palace banquetting hall.

‘Where is your faith now, little heart?’ he murmured scoffingly in her ear.

Her eyes with their dim shadowed blueness sought his. They answered him, — those eyes which mourned, pleaded, believed, and worshipped.

And, as once before, reading their creed in that starlit chamber, the words of half-uttered unbelief died upon his lips.

‘You have lost your way in truth, you little

white soul,' he said. 'What have you to do with me?'

Before she could speak he had left her, and was lost to her view amongst the moving crowd of men and women around. When again she saw him, he was standing in the centre of a group of reckless companions who echoed his gibes with laughter, and applauded his jeers with noisy merriment. She heard and her heart sickened. Each word seemed to her as a blasphemy of life, the slander of humanity which is outrage to God. The past itself, her very memories, grew tainted and confused as she listened. Could it be possible, could it be, that her hands had ever rested in his hands, secure of shelter and cherishing? Could it be that for her his lips had ever supplanted sacrilege with reverence? Had she ever been anything to his life, or was that brief remembered hour but the dream of a dream, was she no more to him than the shadow of a phantom on a twilight wall?

The doubt was a torture — an overmastering craving possessed her to hold some certificate of reality for that past. Once more, if only for one pulse of time, she would again feel the

gentle touch of those hands, hear that voice speak in accents no ear but hers had known; once more she would lay her hand upon the bar which severs life from life, and heart from heart, break it asunder, or, failing, break life itself at his feet. She to whom sorrow's very aspect was new, confronted despair's irenicon with the invulnerable incredulity of hope, — the scepticism of faith.

She lifted her eyes to where he stood divided from her by a distance greater than the distance of any space, the distance between guilt and innocence, between the tainted and the pure. But love has no measuring line, and the world has no fear, for those whom a fear surpassing the world's understanding has overtaken. Before them all, the crowd who would taunt and slander and ridicule, she would go to him — now, this night — this hour. To-morrow it would be too late.

Through the press she made her way towards him. A few steps more and she would have reached her goal. A group of some six or seven talkers intervened, then a narrow circle of men. She passed through the group and stood just outside that little circle which had gathered

round him. One step further, and it too would be behind. Suddenly he became aware of her nearness. He saw her and she saw that he had seen. He stopped in the midst of a half-uttered sentence, then, with words of coarse derision, with a poisoned shaft, launched heedless of whom it might strike, he ended it.

‘For that mad word, soon or late, his life will pay,’ murmured one of his auditors with a sinister menace.

And my Lady Mavis had heard the bitter scoff, and the speech whose very utterance profaned her ears. The lights grew dim; she covered her mouth with her hand, it burnt as if a blow had struck her lips; her heart ached fiercely as though a foot had trampled down its wings. For a while she was very, very still; when movement came back to her the King’s Mountebank was no longer there. To-morrow — the to-morrow which is too late — had come.

Out in the winter street the old priest that night encountered a masker in his dress of silver and blue.

‘Father,’ the Mountebank said, ‘the grace of God is strong. To-night I sinned to save a soul.’

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Again it was summer. By the home of my Lady Mavis the fields were yellow with ungarnered wheat, and brown with heavily grained barley. In the hedgerows the elder-trees had flowered in white star clusters; now they were thick with the purple redness of their ripening berries. Like mist-images the laggard months had passed by my Lady Mavis. The familiar figures of her old life had lost their substantiality, — they seemed new, unknown, and strange. She saw them, but as some hill-side watcher sees the forms of men or sheep, which, reaching the summit of the upland down above his resting-place, stand for a minute's space between his gaze and the blank background of clear sky, and then are lost. The crumpled buds of the corn poppies, the black-streaked, pale-faced pansies in the grass, the white water-weeds and pink willow-herbs in the pools, blossomed in rank profusion, but she went by unseeing. They had been her playmates, her companions, those summer-born children, but she knew them no more. All life, save one life, had lost its personality for her; for her one thing was as another, and all, save one, were as nothing.

And yet — life was not over. She was waiting, waiting with the dumb persistence which is the outwork and borderland of despair.

Then a day came and her waiting was past.

It was late afternoon; the air was laden with heat, the footfall of man and beast was muffled in the thick dry dust of the village highroad. My Lady Mavis came slowly homewards from the quiet fields beyond the village. And little Barbara, with all the low slanting sunlight tangled in her yellow hair, came to meet her, locking her warm brown fingers round my lady's thin white hand. And the child spoke fast and eagerly, and my Lady Mavis listened, her smile for the child, and her thoughts, far elsewhere. Then a word caught her ear, and my lady's face changed. What was Barbara telling her?

‘ And he came on foot — they said — all the way from the city, — and he was all covered with dust, and his dress was stained where they had stabbed him — it was pity to see — it was all blue and silver — and he was so tired — it was a marvel he had come here, so far, to die — for it was in the city far away they had wounded him, and he fainted when they carried

him in, and the wound was deep, so deep. And some one, who lay last night here, said — it was for a jest he had died — a jest he had made in the king's palace on the last night of the Christmas feast. And so they carried him in — and there he lies — I would not look — I was afraid.'

They had reached the inn; little Barbara pointed with hushed voice to the lower windows. The sun shone on them, but the shutters were shut. A little further down the highroad men and women were gathered in groups, and children were playing in the fields beyond. The inn was silent and deserted, its dusty lattices black in the shadows, beneath the eaves of the roof. My Lady Mavis dropped the child's hand; she crossed the white road and stood on the threshold of the half-open door, and then she had left the sunny air behind her, and the sounds of field and village had died to her ear. Within the entrance, on one side the dusky passage, was a door; it was shut. She traversed the corridor and opened it; she entered the long narrow room, whose shuttered windows were closed against the sun.

But in the sun-streaked dusk the covered

figure was outstretched upon a pallet bed. She drew the sheet from face and breast, saw the blue and the tinsel of the dress, and the stains, and the dust of it, and the hands which her lips had kissed, and the arms which had held her in their strong clasp, and the face her hungry eyes had starved to look upon; and the mask was upon the face. Without a movement, without a cry, she stood beside him, while the dull horror of that masked death crept over her, body and brain and spirit; its silence made her dumb, its stillness weighed upon her limbs, it infected her with its mortal contagion. Then with a sudden revulsion she forgot that he was dead.

‘Uncover your face,’ she cried. ‘Uncover your face.’

She stretched out blind hands; the mask should be lifted, and the bar of severance should be shattered, and she should see him, and she should be his. Her fingers caught in his knotted hair, a film of darkness encompassed her, and a blankness held her in which all was dizziness, chillness — and then — all was lost.

‘My lady, when she came, was afraid; she

fainted where he lay,' little Barbara said, sobbing with terror, as at her frightened summons they came and carried my Lady Mavis to an upper room, and laid her upon the bed, where faintness followed faintness, and where hour by hour the unconsciousness of her waking was succeeded only by the unconsciousness of powerless, helpless sleep.

And when once again thought came to her, the blue morning shone upon her eyes—shadowed with the unremembered anguish of the night's pain. The fragrance of clambering jasmine drifted in through the lattice; the song notes of birds, the cooing of doves, filled the radiant summer air.

There was nothing more to fear, they told her; he had been buried at daybreak—as sinners unconfessed—in unconsecrated ground; buried as he had lived, with covered face; a nameless outcast of earth and heaven—the King's Mountebank.

VIII

THE TRUCE OF GOD

HERMAS stood beside the statue and Mèril stood by him. The statue was the figure of a youth; in the hand of the youth was a sword, and upon his head a crown of laurel leaves; his eyes were closed. Hermas had made the statue, its temples had the wings of sleep.

‘The statue is stronger than I,’ said the sculptor. ‘It has no needs. Without bread it will not starve, without water it will not thirst. Pain, before which man is powerless, before it is impotent.’

Across the sunlight which flooded the great bare room, the shadow of a flying swallow passed in a swift curve. Hermas paused to watch the bird’s flight through the summer air. Then he went on:

‘Men and beasts agonize, plants have their health and their maladies, flower gives birth to

flower, and bird mates with bird. But spring-time and harvest time, winter and summer, stone remains stone, and marble marble. The statue is stronger than I.'

He expected no reply, — how should Mèril answer him?

'Of old,' he continued, after a brief pause, 'we are told men made gods of stone; was it in truth that they in stone discerned a God?'

Mèril laughed softly. She loved Hermas; she had his hands to kiss, his face to look on, his voice to hear, she knew no more. Of what lay beyond Hermas she questioned nothing. She had neither past nor future, for her yesterday and to-morrow were not. What signified to her those eternal interrogations of eternal mysteries, what mattered it to her those vulnerabilities of humanity, or that sterile inviolability of stone? Even while he spoke Hermas had raised his hand once more to the marble, indenting a wound mark above the heart.

'Nor when I strike does it suffer,' he said moodily.

Mèril laughed again; thrusting her scarlet-tinged face between the sculptor and his work, she twined her arms round the statue, and with

her feet poised on the stone base she reached the eyelids of the youth with her soft lips.

‘Nor, if I cherish it, will it love,’ she cried gayly. ‘Its loss is infinite.’

Her touch was the touch of a flower, her face in its sensitive uncertainty was like a reflection, vivid in sunlight, pale in shadow.

‘Take heed, Mèril.’ Hermas set her on the ground. ‘There is a legend that once, playing heedlessly, a youth set his marriage ring upon the open hand of a stone Venus. She shut her fingers on the gift and held him bondsman.’

Mèril kissed the hand in which hers lay.

‘Ah, Hermas,’ she said, ‘you, like that old lost world, think that because marble is not mortal it is God; that to be less than human is to be half divine.’

They were the haphazard words of an intelligence that only mirrored the images of life upon its surface, but they turned the current of his thoughts.

‘And to be less than woman,’ he jested, ‘is to be — Mèril.’

‘Am I less than woman?’ she asked, a little cloud of trouble overcasting her face.

His speculative eyes rested upon her evasive

loveliness; and the speculation died out of them. 'You are the soul of a rose, — if roses have souls,' he answered her caressingly; 'where others feel needs you only follow impulses, where they pursue aims you only obey instincts.'

'What is the distinction?' she persisted.

'How should you understand!' he said. 'Want is the consciousness of a void, it is the pang of hunger and the torture of thirst. Impulse is to the joy of bread without hunger, to the joy of dew without fever's parching.'

For a moment a faint gleam of comprehension lay in her eyes, then lifting his hand she laid it on her hair.

'What is it to me, what is anything to me without or within?' she cried. 'Love is enough!'

She loved so much. She had a genius for love; it is a genius which demands great things of those to whom it is given. Further, it has the sacrificial quality of all genius; it produces no works even for the merchandise of the heart. Likewise Hermas loved her, but with a difference. Mèril needed her whole self — Hermas had to be only part of himself — to

love. Mèril, by reason of her love, could do many things; Hermas had to put aside many things to love.

When Hermas made the statue he was poor, the great house which was their home was beautiful as a palace and bare as a prison. Mèril loved its bareness, it was so white and still. There is a restlessness to some women in the presence even of things inanimate.

But after the winged statue was made, Hermas became famous and he became rich. Men and women came and went in the rooms which once were solitary. The world entered Mèril's paradise. At its hands she demanded nothing; to Hermas it gave all that he demanded. Soon there remained nothing for him to strive for save the unattainable; he suffered the supreme defeat of victory. When a man has won all that is winable, he can hereafter only draw blanks. It is an inevitable penalty of success — Hermas grew hardened to it; as it became a custom it ceased to be a sensation, but the accent of life was lost.

Often he left Mèril. When he left her she lived alone in the great echoing house. She needed no companionship. Hermas was pres-

ent or Hermas was absent, and when he was absent her life lay between a memory and an expectation. She was not unhappy, for her memories and her expectations were both of joy. Only in the stillness and the solitude she grew like a shadow; waiting, she wasted away with her heart's homesickness for his arms.

Once he came back to her suddenly. She had not known his return, she had not heard his footsteps. She had fallen asleep in the white room where the winged statue stood upon his pedestal with his closed eyelids and parted lips. There Hermas found her. The sunshine of the late afternoon flooded the room with dusty radiance, the cobweb threads of her hair had caught both the radiance and the dustiness; they shone as if powdered with gold, like the feathers of a gold-moth's wings, but her face was very white, and in the full summer heat she lay as if the chill of winter encompassed her. A dumb terror held Hermas for a moment speechless, then kneeling beside her he wakened her with kisses. He saw the color spring back to her face, the lagging pulses beat swiftly, and still his kisses touched

her lips as never before they had touched them. Under those kisses her eyes shone like mad stars.

‘You are my life,’ she whispered. ‘Life of my life!’ Then with a swift recoil of terror she shrank from him.

‘See!’ she cried, ‘the statue bleeds!’

He turned. By some freak of reflected light a sun-ray, dyed red as blood by the ruby crystal of a great cup set on a high shelf above, struck its stain upon the breast of the statue — and on the breast of the statue, above its heart, was the wound mark Hermas had cut in the marble.

He saw and laughed.

‘It bleeds because of my kisses,’ he said. ‘Stone is a jealous god.’ Then his laughter died away. ‘Jealous and strong,’ he added, as if compelled by some afterthought of indefinite distrust.

Again his gaze reverted to Mèril. He saw once more her face as he had seen it in sleep, white and still. Even now it seemed to him as if the crimson flush, new-born with his coming, was fading and giving place to that former pallor. It was like the contagion of marble.

Mèril had risen; she was standing close be-

side the statue, her eyes were drowsily raised towards it, as if she half expected to see the flow of the wound and the drip of the life-blood from its cleft heart. But the red stain was gone; the sunlight had shifted; the sun sank fast in throbbing colors behind the walls and roofs of the city streets, and as it sank it left behind it a sky of amber and orange, flecked with rose-red clouds. Presently these too faded, and a clear twilight which was like white fire filled the room.

Neither of the two had spoken for many minutes, but Hermas was watching Mèril with a sharpening sense of disquietude. At last he broke the silence.

‘Why were you sleeping?’ he demanded, with a certain urgency.

Mèril crept back to him; she leant against him, and drew his passive hand softly over her eyelids.

‘I wanted it,’ she said. Then after a short pause, ‘I want it still,’ she murmured, with a gesture of profoundest languor. He let her sleep, but the slumber seemed to him like the invasion of an enemy — it had the remoteness of death.

The next day, and the next, something of

that shadowy drowsiness clung to her; her life lay beneath it as the muted strings of a violin. Then by slow degrees its muffled stillness was broken; beneath his hands the film which overspread her vitality dispersed; warmth, and color, and movement revived. In those days his love changed. Before, he had loved her, now he became her lover. She was aware of some change, with a vague, indefinite consciousness. The perception brought with it an unaccustomed burden; a sense of inadequacy to respond to some new demand oppressed her. Her joy was gone. The unfamiliarities of life's relations are like estrangements to women; a new nearness is like a separation.

‘I have a grief, Hermas,’ she said.

‘I see no tears,’ he answered lightly, yet wondering.

‘To you I gave all,’ she continued, paying no heed to his words, ‘I gave all, and more than all can no woman give. Now, you who were once content, need more.’

He made no response. She moved restlessly, striving to disentangle the thread of her thoughts.

‘To give more, I must be more,’ she went on.

‘More than Mèril?’ he said, smiling. But he could not dispel that troubled sense of incompleteness.

She lifted wistful eyes to his; their wistfulness was like a passion.

‘Ah, Hermas,’ she cried, ‘I cannot, cannot understand; it is like lying between a waking and a sleep, between a life and a death — and neither are mine. But the sleep is stronger than the waking and the death than the life.’

‘Death is not stronger than life,’ he asserted, stirred to denial by some sense of contest. His own fantastic imaginings had found utterance in her words.

‘It is stronger, it is stronger,’ she reiterated. ‘Its expression is in impotence, the helplessness of dead lips, the weakness of dead hands, but behind the dead is the death-giver, and he is stronger than all.’

Mèril clasped her arms round Hermas.

‘Give me life,’ she said, ‘give me life, that I may give back to you all you demand.’

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It was evening. A gay crowd thronged hall and stairs and corridors. Mèril passed among the guests with the face of a woman to whom

a crowd is a solitude. Once her lips trembled and her color came and went, as Hermas for a moment lingered at her side.

A woman near by laughed.

‘You are his bondwoman,’ she said.

‘To be bondwoman of one is to be freed-woman of many,’ Mèril answered.

The woman who jeered paused. She had fought with the world and won, yet confronted by Mèril’s eyes with their remote enfranchisement, her triumphs shrank into littleness. What were they but tributes to the world’s empire? To conquer a world is to proclaim that the world is worth conquest. She was a thrall to her victories.

Yet — she knew Hermas — once she had loved him. She looked from him to Mèril; from the god who was dust, to the worship which was infinite, — looked and was silent, and turned away, lest in place of pity she should envy the emancipation of the bondage she derided.

The hours wore on to midnight. But for Mèril the lassitude of the summer night had no fatigue, and the turmoil of laughter and jests had no unrest. Her heart waited, enclosed in its own quietude, for the hour when no voice

save the voice of Hermas should sound in her ears, when no eyes save her eyes should look upon his face. And yet, even as she waited, she was conscious of coming change — the ear of some spiritual sense caught as it were the whirr of fortune's wheel which turned. Something was coming, — coming that very night. It would come, as day comes after a dream, reality after an image, — the same yet not the same.

She stole from the crowd, away from the voices, away from the lights and the glitter, and the movement — they oppressed her like a narrowed horizon. The gray night was in the summer-garden, — its hand lay upon the eyes of the flowers. The air was like the breath of the earth's fever, but it was silent. She was not tired, but she would rest; without weariness she craved for repose in that dumb grayness. In a niche, beneath a high stone wall, was a seat of stone, shadowed from the twilight; she sought it. The soft dark plumes of the cypresses against the sky were motionless; there were star-shadows on the grass, and something was calling her to sleep, and she was sinking, sinking into the utmost recess of slumber, where even dreams are forgotten and out of mind.

Within the house the lights burnt lower and lower. Men and women came from it in twos and threes, singly, or in loitering companies. Presently they came no more. All was still, — the last footstep had died away, and the windows one by one darkened in the wall.

Hermas waited. Soon Mèril would come to him, — come with words or with silence, with the grace of unashamed caresses, or with the half-fear of her heart's surrendering worship. He was patient for her coming, with the patience bred of security, the decoy which ensnares men to inaction until joy's hour has passed by beyond recall, uncaptured and unpossessed.

Without Mèril slept. From time to time, in that leaden slumber, she stirred with some fret of restless awakening; once with wide-open eyes she looked upon the night, then again sleep re-entangled her in its meshes, and her weighted lids re-closed.

Within, Hermas passed from room to room. He had waited, and Mèril had not come. He sought her. He would find her somewhere sleeping, as once before in the afternoon sunlight he had found her, and she would waken, as then she had wakened. But he sought in

vain. Each room was tenantless and forlorn, as solitude assumes to itself forlornness when once it has been peopled. He called her name. No answer came. Then all the darkness and the vacancy became vitalized with fears — on every threshold a terror stood sentinel — the very silence became a menace.

He relinquished his unavailing search,—he fled from the empty house, and unsought he found her. The fire of his kisses was on her lips and her eyelids and her hands, but no least quiver of response, the answer of life to life, came from the quiet figure, wrapped in that inanimate repose. He lifted her in his arms and retraced his steps; he laid her on the low window-seat where before he had found her on the first day of his home-coming. When day came, day would waken her, he told his despair, and his despair answered him. He waited and watched and waited; and the statue, with its winged brows, stood near by in sinister whiteness, with the mark of the bloodless scar, and the muteness of its passive secrecy. Over Hermas the old fantasy regained ascendancy. The marble lived, lived with an evasive vitality, which, like the breath of a malignant herb,

poisoned the air with unknown malady: and the statue was stronger than he, in that strange half-life which eluded his grasp. And he, Hermas, had given to the marble a form, had endowed that passive, dormant life within it with the fashioning of a man's shape, had set a weapon in its hands, and, under the image of a death-wound, had ascribed to the senseless figure a heart.

He left Mèril and drew near the statue.

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And Mèril still slept, held in the soft prison of that tenacious slumber.

Without, the early dawn radiated in silver tints across the sky, the steel glimmers of light caught the dew-drenched grass, and, penetrating the windows, struck here and there upon a glass cup or a bright metal. Then sudden shafts of opal fires shot across the silver, and flakes of scarlet flame drifted like burning spray upon the wide expanse of the morning's blueness.

With the shock of a cry, Mèril awakened. The cry still rang in her ears, — the cry of a dream. For a moment she lay confused, doubting, wondering, until memory's balance readjusted itself, and life the substantial divided itself from

life the unsubstantial, and wakefulness, with which all wakefulness she had ever known became as a blurred phantom, swept over her senses with a vividness that pierced and stung.

‘Hermas,’ she cried, and she repeated, ‘Hermas.’ Against the pedestal, where once the statue had stood, Hermas was leaning. At his feet the statue lay shattered upon the marble floor. The shaft of its weapon was broken, the hilt severed from the hand which had held it, and in the hand of Hermas lay the point of the splintered blade.

‘The statue is dead,’ said Hermas.

Mèril came swiftly towards him; her eyes saw him alone, her heart beat for the captivity of his hand.

‘I slept,’ she said, ‘but I have awakened.’

Her eyes shone; the whole joy of the summer daybreak, its strength and its fulness, was in the beating of her pulses, its rose-color on her lips.

Hermas stirred; he moved as if to meet her — then he fell back to the same posture.

‘The statue is dead,’ he repeated. She was beside him, she clasped her arms round his neck — his words had no significance to her ears.

‘Life has come to me,’ she whispered. ‘It has come that I may give it back to you — give all that you demand. My grief is gone.’

Hermas raised himself erect. He held her to him and with blind lips sought hers. When he released her, her eyes fell upon the sword point. It lay where it had fallen from his hand, — the sword point which he had drawn from his breast.

‘Hermas,’ Mèril cried with sudden terror, ‘the blade is wet.’

IX

A ROSE OF PARADISE

ONE day an angel leant over the edge of heaven. She looked down through the blue ether of the skies to where a small, faintly hued sphere was suspended far below. It hung in limitless space. That sphere was a star, and that star was Earth.

In the crown garland of flowers that the angel wore, one flower was over-blown. That flower was a rose, — a rose of Paradise.

As the angel bent forward, watching the dim circle of the Earth's globe, the petals of the open blossom were loosed from its stem; they fell upon the clouds and floated in the air, but the heart of the flower, which was heavier, fell farther than they, it fell even to the Earth itself. That was a long way from Heaven.

It fell on a roadway near the brim of a little wayside fountain. The sun shone hotly

upon it by day; the stars shone coldly upon it by night; the winds scattered a covering of dust and sand over it; the dew of the fountain sprinkled it with water; till the seed, which was at the heart of the rose, quickened and stirred and lived, it put forth leaves and became a plant.

But the heart of the rose, from which its roots sprang, grieved, homesick for Heaven; and the leaves, as they rustled, asked:

‘Who will bear us back to Paradise?’

So bitterly did the rose lament its exile that until one should come to bear it quickly homewards it would not bloom.

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Summer came and brought travellers that way.

‘Who will carry me back to Paradise?’ wept the rose.

The first who came was a yellow-haired child.

‘Bloom for me, O desert rose!’ the child cried; ‘blossom for me, and I will take thee and plant thee in my garden, and tend and water thee, and thou shalt lack nothing.’

The child took the rose-plant, and set it to grow in a pleasant garden shaded with poplar-

trees, and surrounded by fair comrade blossoms of lily and carnation.

Yet the rose-plant did not blossom, and presently the child uprooted the flowerless plant and cast it forth upon the highroad.

The rose lay in the dust, its roots dried, its leaves withered.

A second traveller passed. He was a poet-youth, happy, and strong, and gay. He pitied the dried roots and the scorched leaves, and lifted the plant from the dust.

‘Blossom for me, poor rose,’ he said, ‘and I will plant thee in a southward window, and will love and cherish and tend thee and sing of thee.’

So he set the rose in a southward window, and tended it and cherished it, but neither for him would the rose-plant put forth her blossoms.

The poet-youth wearied of the flowerless plant, and he too cast it forth.

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The rose withered on the stones of the street beneath the poet’s window.

An old man went by. He was crippled and bent with years, his steps were feeble and uncertain.

‘He will be God’s next baby,’ said the poet, as leaning from the window he watched him pass.

The old man leant upon his staff to rest, and for very weariness and sorrow of life he wept.

The dew rain of his tears dropped upon the parched plant and the faded leaves. As they dropped upon it the plant revived, its sap ran with new strength, it budded, the buds broke into blossom, the reddest blossom in all the world. The plant had put forth its life, the life of the heart of the rose, into its flower.

The eyes of the old man fell upon it. He stretched out his hand, trembling with weakness, and plucked the rose.

‘Lest it be trodden underfoot,’ he said.

And the rose was content.

‘I blossomed for him,’ said the rose. ‘Childhood and youth have far to go before they reach Heaven; but he will carry me home, for old age is Heaven’s babyhood.’

X

POOR SATÁN

‘HE is a bad actor,’ said the manager of the strolling company of players where Jován made his first appearance, and so said the first violin of the orchestra of the little country town theatre where Jován tried his luck the second time. The violinist was an old man and had a great deal of experience, so that was discouraging; worse still, the audience said the same thing, and worse even than that was to come, for one day something inside Jován said it too.

‘He is a bad actor,’ so said the part of Jován that did not go on the stage, the part of him that stood with the manager at the wings of the theatre, that watched him from the orchestra, that sat in the front rows with the audience, the part which looked at him from outside, which shook its head when he came before the foot-

lights, which waited for him at the door and walked home with him through the empty streets when the play was over. There was Jován the player, and there was Jován the critic, and then there was Jován himself — Jován the nature-made, the nature-bred, who hated the critic and spoilt the player; Jován the man, strong and unruly, self-asserting and tenacious; Jován who would be himself when he ought to be somebody else, who, when the player changed his coat and went before the audience, followed him close and would not be left behind.

‘One must change not one’s dress only, but one’s body and one’s soul also if one would be an actor,’ said the violinist, and that Jován could not do.

When Jován was in love, he played like a lover, when he had a wicked mood he played like a villain, when he was good he played like a saint, and it did not do at all.

Jován lived with his mother; she had Eastern blood in her, and it was from her he had got his name ‘Jován.’ The Germans turn it into Johann. His father had been a rich English merchant, a trader in the East, successful, unscrupulous, cold-hearted, and luxurious; for

the rest the story was an old one: it was first written in the Book of Genesis, and Jován and his mother were driven forth as Hagar and Ishmael of old, with this difference, that Jován was of age and that no angel appeared to succor them in their journeying. Jován was his mother's idol.

‘ You are like me, you have nothing of your father in you,’ she would tell him, and Jován, who played with ideas when he had no other toys to break, would answer her:

‘ When I have lived out all the life in me which is yours, then I shall come to the life in me which is his, and when I have lived out that too, I shall begin to live my own life — to be original.’

And a year later he said:

‘ The parts are getting mixed up now: the shell of me, who acts, is you; the part which laughs and hisses, is my father; the kernel who is inside the actor and spoils his acting is me, myself.’

Jován and Hagar were poor and they were vagrants. The little mother was an actress by birth and a mimic of some skill, and when Jován failed she succeeded enough to

keep body and soul together, though more she could not accomplish. As for Jován there was no counting on him. Sometimes for days he would bury himself in his books, books he would starve to buy; then they would be thrown aside, forgotten, and he would pass days and nights with wild companions, till he wearied of them too, and found some other pleasure or interest to usurp dominion over him. He could like but one thing at a time, he avowed. When destitute and homeless, a chance crust from Dives's table, a trivial accident of pleasure, a passing friendship, would engross and satisfy him; when relative prosperity befell him, he would fret and strain and struggle to overtake some dry leaf of fancy, whirled away from his vain pursuit by the wind of fate. Hungry-eyed, underclad, with thin hands and marked cheekbones, with stooping shoulders and narrowed chest — such was Jován. He had neither beauty nor grace, his hair was colorless, his mouth restless and unquiet, his eyes were pale gray with black pupils, which dilated and contracted with curious rapidity; for his moods they were as many and as varied as his fortunes.

‘ You cannot hate and you cannot love, no, not

for one month together, my Jován,' said his mother. 'Not for one month; no, nor for one week. Do not trust him, child, do not trust him.'

Jován was sitting in the window of the poor little room where last they had pitched their tent; he was then, it might be, twenty-two years of age, the Servian woman was some seventeen years older, but still the beauty of her youth clung to her, as loath to quit one who had loved it so well. A girl, hardly more than a child in years, leant against the framework of the dusty window-panes, she was so close to Jován that her hair, falling loose to her waist, touched his shoulders; he took a handful of the soft yellow threads, and slipped them round and through his fingers, and smiling back at his mother he drew the girl nearer.

'Let her go, let her go, Jován,' said the Servian woman, searching their faces with keen, kind eyes.

'Yes, let her go, let her go,' echoed Jován, with his laugh (which was the only beautiful thing about him): 'who keeps her?'

'He does not love you, child; do not give him your heart,' said the mother, who was like

Hagar, and knew what men were; but she laughed back at Jován even while she warned the child.

‘He does not love you,’ Jován repeated, mimicking her tones.

‘No, he does not love you, do not love him, he is good for nothing; he pays yesterday’s debts with to-morrow’s wages; he is a spendthrift, a bankrupt in the coin which is stamped with a heart on one side and a branch of bitter herb on the other. Do not love him, he does not love you.’

He lifted a long twist of waving hair he had unbound from his hand and touched it with his lips.

The girl suddenly moved; wrenching the freed hair from his hold, she crouched on the ground beside him, she laid her arms across his knees, and then hid her face in her hands. He touched her bent head gently, friendlily.

‘But she loves me, my sweet white heart,’ he said softly.

It was nothing new that she, little pale Lise, should love him. Children had a way of loving him, and women had too; they loved him not as women love their lovers, but as dogs love

their masters, as winter-starved birds the hand that succors and shelters them. Jován knew it, knew that it was not as a lover that Lise (and others also) loved him. He knew that Lise was happy when his hand touched hers, when his voice was within her hearing, when his eyes rested on her: what did it matter? — he would not harm her not by word nor look, and if she gave him more than he could return, she would never miss his care, his pity. When Jován broke a woman's heart, it would not be by unkindness.

Lise was dying. He had picked her up, half-starved, wholly forlorn, in the roadways of a great city. She was not the first foundling, child, beast or bird, whom he had brought home to be sheltered, caressed, played with, thought over, and when there was no more to be done, forgotten; Lise was one of many such foundlings. Lise was an episode — all Jován's life was made up of episodes: hers was soon over — a grave, narrow and short, in the poor people's cemetery, was soon its only record. Jován was playing a clown's part the night after she died; he was hissed off the boards, and the manager dismissed him. Jován was a bad actor.

‘ But he has a heart,’ his mother said proudly, and she took an engagement herself, and played an old woman’s part at the theatre, and they lived, as best they might, on her earnings.

It was that year that Jován had made a friend, a doctor, who had been kind to Lise when she died. Gotthold, that was his name, was a student, an enthusiast in his own science, a would-be discoverer. He was older than Jován, and had a wife and a five-year-old baby. Jován was friends with the baby as well as with the father. Gotthold lent him books, he taught him many things, took him to lectures, to the hospitals and into the hospital theatre, where the chief actor does nothing, and no other acting is allowed.

Jován studied these things with passion; it was a new world to him — a country of disease, and sickness, and death. He had, said Gotthold, a genius for science, only he was a genius who had missed his road. Jován grew day by day more absorbed, more ambitious and more happy.

‘ These things are real,’ he would say; ‘ this is life, substance not shadow, the actual not the phantasm.’

But Hagar shook her head when he talked so, deriding the mimicry of life which had been his art and hers.

‘It is the shadows which rule men’s hearts and souls,’ she would reply. ‘The feigned death on the stage, not the dead body in the hospital ward, stirs the heart of the world. They who read the police report without pity, will weep bitter tears over the romance before the footlights.’

Hagar knew life if she knew little else.

‘There is a flaw in your mind, little mother.’ Jován only mocked and kissed her when she spoke earnestly to him. The two go well together, mocking and kissing!

So the weeks wore away, and a cloud settled on Jován’s brow.

‘Curse the life!’ he said bitterly one night; ‘my mind is a forge, it can only turn out tools for other men to use.’

‘Your father used the tools other men made — and then he threw them away, that was worse,’ Hagar told him.

Soon she learnt that Gotthold had made a great discovery in science, and had won the highest prize that fame could accord him; then

she guessed what had befallen Jován, he had forged the tool and his friend had used it; but of it, or of his friend who had cheated and defrauded him, he said no word. Only he studied his friend's studies no more, he studied his friend instead.

‘I want to act a thief's part,’ he told her.

‘Then you had better steal,’ she answered. ‘Jován, you are no actor; once you were a mimic like me, now you are not even that. You have but one chance of success left you, *be what you act.*’

‘You are a wise woman, little mother,’ said Jován thoughtfully. ‘Perhaps you are right, perhaps I will.’

He took to his books again, play-books now; he studied the dramas of old writers. ‘He would rob the dead first, he said, before he stole from the living; it was good practice, he said.

Gotthold still came to the house, but not so often as before — there was constraint in the fellowship of the two friends. That winter Jován left his mother and travelled from town to town seeking employment. He was changing rapidly: he had discarded his wildness and uncouth manners, he was growing courteous;

observant of other men, as a woman is. He 'was learning success,' he wrote word to Hagar; then at length he sent to her to join him; he had obtained what he wanted and was rising rapidly in his profession.

'I have learnt a good deal since we parted, little mother; to drink, and to steal, and to lie, to cheat one's friend and to betray the woman who has loved one. You were right, one must be what one has to seem.' Hagar could not discover if he was mocking her. She looked at him and said nothing; she saw his father in him. 'Little mother, my fortune is made or lost. I am to play the devil.' He spoke gayly, confidently.

'You will fail,' she said; 'the devil will be like Jován.'

'I will succeed; if the devil is like Jován, Jován must be like the devil,' he said jestingly.

On the first night of his performance, he again stood by her bed.

'Little mother, I have succeeded, the devil has done great things for us.' He laughed and kissed her.

'It is ill to parody God's holy words.' Hagar had never before rebuked him. He smiled at

her and left her. After that success, the managers would let him play no other part.

‘Herr Johann is a great artist,’ people told each other; they told Hagar so, and also they said it to Jován, and he believed them. No part of him now sat in the front rows and sneered as he played, no part of him mocked his efforts; he felt himself master of his part and of his audience; he felt his foothold surer week by week as he journeyed from city to city, winning everywhere new laurels. Who of his old friends would have known him now! Self-possessed, with a little quiet scorn for the men who envied, the women who courted him, self-controlled—kindly, courteous to his chosen associates—his moodiness, his variability were gone.

Again his old friend Gotthold met him. Dr. Gotthold, too, had prospered; he was rich, sought after, a coward with principles and a conscience, a broken melancholy man, despite his fortunes. His wife was dead, and all whom he loved he had lost save one—the baby girl of old days, the child whom Jován had played with and petted.

Jován saw her in a crowd. A tall, slight

girl, with gray eyes and fair hair, she leant listless and tired against the doorway of an inner room. She was for the moment silent and alone.

‘She is like — who?’ His memory failed him. He lost sight of her, and shifted his position to regain it. Some one had addressed her and she lifted her head to reply; her raised eyes met Jován’s gaze — her face changed suddenly, she broke off in what she was saying.

‘Ah, it is Lise,’ Jován thought, and then he wondered where the likeness lay, wondered until he knew.

It was not difficult for him to guess. Women loved him now as they had loved him before, blindly, trustfully, and now as then, if a woman’s heart was broken, no guilt was his. But one difference there was between his past and his present; then, if he had smiled at their folly, he had nevertheless been touched by it, he had given them what return he could, he was no miser in kindness and pity, and for what he gave, they, as little foundling Lise, had been content to live — or to die. This new Lise loved him; she asked nothing of him, she did not even know what might be hers to possess. When he had spoken kindly, gently, to her,

half-jesting, half-serious, as was his wont with women, the light had come into her gray eyes, and the color to her quiet face, and her whole life seemed to her, as she looked back over it, but a waiting for that hour. When he was gone from her side, a past had sprung into existence, the future seemed filled with a memory, a memory out of which she would create a new world. The days of creation are never over in a woman's heart, though the sons of God do not shout with joy over them.

That night, as Jován played, Margaret seemed to him to have grown like Gotthold's daughter. How easily he could have taught a Faust to win her, have taught her to yield to a Faust!

Yet he was wrong, for in those days at least, Faust would have had to tell her that he and her father were old friends, and Faust would have had to have Jován's voice, and his eyes, like Jován's, must have been gray with black-rimmed irises.

'You are so cold a devil that you would freeze hell,' the girl who played Margaret said to him one evening. 'If Mephistopheles had been as wicked as you, he would have damned even Margaret.'

Gotthold's daughter was there that night. She grew very white as the play went on; when Margaret yielded and fell, she shivered and burst into tears, but she came again a few nights after.

Jován's stay in that city was over, the last day came.

'We shall be four to-night, little mother,' he said; 'you and I and Gotthold and his daughter. To-morrow we go; to-night we part, he and I.'

'It is well to have met and forgiven,' the old woman said; she was old now, but her eyes were blue and bright as ever. He read suspicion in them.

'Little mother,' he said, 'what people look for they find. You are like the rest, they look for the actor in the man — it is a folly.'

Jován was angered, yet he laughed.

'She loves you,' the old woman said.

'She loves' — Jován mimicked her caressingly — 'all women love — she loves — Jován — or another.'

'She is young and she is good — you, Jován, are cruel.' But Hagar kissed him all the same — Jován was her idol.

'You make me wicked,' she said, 'and you

will break her heart.' Then she added quickly with a strange impulse of fear, 'Jován, you are not yourself to-day.'

In the mirror before him Jován caught sight of his own face—he turned away quickly, then looked again; the mouth there had a curve it would be useful to remember.

That evening Jován talked long with Gotthold, while the girl listened to Hagar's stories of bygone days and fortunes. She was happy and content—Hagar was his mother, and he was near; yet she was oppressed with a vague presentiment of fear, of fear for the days which were to come.

Jován listened to Gotthold, he watched the girl.

'How unlike Lise, and how like,' he thought.

Unlike the heavy silken folds of her white gown to Lise's ragged brown dress; unlike the smooth hair, coiled as a Greek statue's might be, round her fair head, to Lise's long, loose, wind-roughened waves of yellow threads; unlike her slender white hands with their wealth of jewels; like her mouth with its parted lips, the grave eyes, melancholy and patient, un-exacting, pleading.

‘ Was she beautiful, or was her beauty only the shadow of her love? ’ he wondered.

Gotthold, worn and eager, a conscience-tortured enthusiast, nerveless, deprecatory, was speaking rapidly of chances, of ideas, of discoveries, of cases of life and death, of possibilities of cure, of probabilities of failure — then of one special instance, of a long hard struggle with the veiled antagonist — Death, in which he found himself engaged.

‘ You despair? ’ Jován asked, as Gotthold paused in his story.

‘ Almost — and yet, if only I could but conquer this one case — ’ He broke off; Jován turned, he whispered a few words in Gotthold’s ear — Gotthold started at the suggestion his ears had caught.

‘ I had not thought, not dreamt of it, ’ he cried. ‘ The risk! ’

‘ Think of it now, ’ Jován answered — ‘ think of the honor, should you succeed — of the fame. ’

‘ I dare not — “ thou shalt do no murder ” — I dare not risk it. ’

‘ Why? ’ Jován spoke deliberately, coldly confident. ‘ If you succeed your genius will be crowned. ’

‘ If not — if I fail? ’

‘ Enough,’ interrupted Jován. ‘ If you fail you will only have borrowed a life in the interest of science.’

‘ But my conscience?’ murmured the other nervelessly.

‘ To be a doctor is to be an experimenter,’ returned Jován, and he left Gotthold to speak with his daughter.

‘ When you were little more than a baby,’ he said, leaning back beside her on the couch where she sat, ‘ your father used to teach me many wise things. We used to talk, as we have been talking to-night, of the discoveries, of new experiments, which would make us famous when we were old men. I was a poor player then, often ragged, often hungry — but I was rich, I had a heart, and I had a friend.’

He paused, his eyes held hers, a thrill of terror flashed over her face as he bent a little closer to her; it faded, and he smiled. Her face was an open book to him, on it he could read what she read on his, nothing else was written there. She dropped her eyes and covered her mouth with one hand — she said

nothing; to him she could never speak with ease, to-night it was impossible.

‘ You were a child then. One night I brought you a doll dressed all in tinsel; I and Gotthold talked, I told him of a new experiment, a new discovery that I believed, in my ignorance, might make a man’s fortune to have made. He undeceived me, he told me the discovery was already made by another—you played with your tinsel doll. You are too old to play with dolls now, but I have brought you the tinsel, for a farewell gift.’

The girl’s face grew white, flushed, and grew white again as Jován talked on, softly, with pauses here and there. As he finished speaking he took a bracelet, a heavy ring of gold, from the table near, and held out his hand for hers. Silently she let him take her slim fingers in his hold, and slip the yellow circle over them to its place upon her arm. It was too large—his fingers, strong and steady, pressed the metal till the joined ends overlapped each other. He pressed it too close indeed, it marked her wrist. As he released her hand the girl drew a short fast breath; Hagar, looking across from the opposite side of the hearth, said involuntarily:

‘ She is — Lise. ’

But she was not Lise — Jován knew it. Lise was a child, a child he had caressed, and who had answered his caresses with a child's touch. This was a woman. Lise would have kissed his hands with her lips; this one, standing there tall and pale in her white dress, standing at the gates of the paradise of ignorant innocence out of which he had drawn her, did more. Her eyes, raised for one moment, looked into his, and silently she laid — he knew it — her whole self at his feet.

Jován's face grew a shade colder. Gotthold had already taken his leave, he was standing at the further end of the room, awaiting his daughter, too absorbed in thought to be conscious of her delay.

‘ Are you not content that she should wear your ring round her heart, but that you must put it on her wrist also? ’ the old mother, who had herself once loved, asked bitterly as she came between the two.

The girl started, shivering as though wakened suddenly to life — and turned from him.

‘ Good-night — good-bye! ’ she said; ‘ I thank you. ’

‘ You have broken her heart, Jován,’ said the little mother

‘ No, I have only brought it to life; that sometimes comes to the same thing in the long run.’ Then he added, ‘ She will soon love again and regain — something better than Paradise.’

‘ The first time a woman loves it is for what she can give, the next it is for what she can get,’ said Hagar. ‘ To you she has given, from others she will take.’

But Jován only jested. ‘ I have done nothing,’ he said to Hagar and to himself also.

After that Gotthold was ruined. He tried what he called an experiment. His patient was a man of wealth and importance. Gotthold’s experiment failed, and the world called it murder. He was a disgraced man, and his friends forsook him; with tarnished reputation and decaying fortunes he fled from the city where his disaster had befallen him, and sought shelter once more in his native town.

‘ What news?’ Hagar had asked, the day when the record of Gotthold’s disgrace became public.

‘ Of a success,’ Jován answered her.

‘ I have robbed him of that which he stole from me — fortune,’ Jován told himself again and again.

That evening the critic said, ‘ He is after all overrated, he plays like a devil with remorse,’ and that was quite wrong.

In the winter he accepted an engagement at the city where little Lise lay in the poor’s cemetery and where Gotthold lived forsaken and alone. He played at the theatre where they had hissed him the night Lise had died. Now the people crowded to see him, and to applaud him — or his reputation.

It was a bitter season, snow covered the roofs and ‘sprinkled’ the streets and pavements. Women went muffled and veiled, men with fur drawn down over their brows. The horses fretted at their bits, the walkers hurried past as if they could escape the wind by haste. Yet at the stage-door one woman scantily clothed, with bare hands stiffening in the freezing air, waited motionlessly patient for the play to end.

Jován slipping out quickly, did not notice her, but something fell at his feet, as with a fellow actor he took his seat in his carriage.

‘ What was that?’ he said, glancing back, through the snow mist.

‘ A beggar,’ the other replied.

At Jován’s feet lay a broken gold circle large enough to go round a woman’s wrist.

‘ What?’ he said, hardly catching the other’s words.

‘ What?’ repeated his companion with a half-laugh. ‘ What — Margaret was!’

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A few days later beside the grave where Lise lay they made another grave, as narrow but longer — it bore no name upon the stone.

Jován played no more as the devil, he threw up his engagement that very winter.

‘ He was a bad actor, he could play no part but one, his day was soon over.’ So people said, and the name of Jován was forgotten.

XI

THE CRAZY PILGRIM

THE common was on fire. Crispin had watched the conflagration from the very beginning. First came the little cloud of thin gray smoke. It spread like a fringe of vapor and skirted the sides of the narrow foot-track which led from the old ruin, where Crispin was master, across the waste level of grass and fern and furze and brambles, to the little hamlet beyond. After the smoke upshot a single serpent tongue of bright flame; it caught and clung round a budding blackthorn stem, then it kindled the tangled undergrowths, and the smoke was tinged with changing colors, red and brown, and streaked with russet-purples. It was no longer a stationary, upright column, it broadened, it was a wind-blown mass, curling and uncurling, as great waves do, at its edge. Presently

it unfurled, it floated, a gigantic banner, spreading its jagged folds now this way, now that. It divided, it joined, it sundered again, in ever increasing density and volume. Sometimes it was swept flat; to Crispin it seemed like the lid of a whole reservoir of liquid fire; again the fire blazed forth, illuminating all with sinister luridness. And in the smoke the sparks flew up and down until the smoke itself seemed turning to flame. Then over the sound of crackling wood and holly leaf and dry gorse, came a roar, more terrible than the roar of seas when the tempest strikes them, and wilder than the moan of the forest when the storm wails in its boughs.

An hour before, all had been so still. The spring sun had shone down, from its heaven of silver and blue, upon the gold-brown gorse and the short thick grass of the village grazing-ground, on the big pond where the cattle drank, blinking mournful brown eyes placidly upon the tranquil scene around. Now all was changed, the yellow tracts of furze were mere thickets of blackened stalks, the mosses were burnt to the root, the wide-eyed blue speedwells, the patches of violet hyacinth,

the springing shoots of bracken ferns were parched to death. And still the fire was hungry for destruction. It was a fierce huntsman seeking its prey. The birds flew from it, the bees abandoned their honey-quest, the white and brown rabbits scurried away from their burrows, and the snakes glided from their hiding-places.

But Crispin loved it. He drew nearer and nearer to it, minute by minute. The scent of the burnt peat overpowered the fragrance of blossoming broom, a hot suffocating breath fanned his brows, the path beneath his feet smouldered, his eyes smarted — yet he loved it — the fire and the smoke! The fire which sprang upward and the smoke which sank earthward: the flame to the sky; the ashes to the earth, each seeking its own element.

Into what strange forms that bulwark of gray darkness before him was fashioning itself! Shapes of hill and mountain rose in it, upreared pillars, vaulted roofs, domes of solemn cathedrals, palace turrets, battlemented fortresses!

Crispin came yet closer. The smoke-cloud grew into a wall, the frontier wall of a hidden

country; an unknown land lay within. The white ashes powdered his dusky hair and stung his cheek; the charred twigs snapped where he trod, and the ruts in the turf glowed anew as his foot struck them; his eyes ached in the intensity of the heat. They were gray as the smoke itself and there was a light under their grayness. And the smoke-wall was there; he stretched out his hand to touch it, but that fierce hotness scorched him. He fell back a step, dizzy and blind. Again he looked. The compact sheet of darkness was still there — what lay within it?

‘The smoke-country,’ a voice jeered shrilly, far and yet near. ‘The smoke-country, Crispin.’

It appeared as though the wall took a sharper outline. Crispin watched it as a mariner sees the sheer frontage of a precipice through the wavering mist of a sea-fog.

‘I know it,’ Crispin murmured.

‘You can come in, if you can find the door,’ laughed the same voice.

‘Where is it?’ cried Crispin with angry eagerness.

‘ On the other side.’

The mocking response sounded almost in his ear; and on the summit of the wall Crispin thought he could discern the figure of a steel-armed sentinel, who with spear in hand kept ward upon the battlements of a vast citadel.

He sprang forward, but the showers of fine dust stifled him; a strong, soft gust of wind arose; the garrisoned keep, whose heights he would scale, swayed to and fro; he heard a dying echo of trumpet notes and blown bugles.

‘ Crispin, come in, come in!’ The scoffing words mingled with the notes and with them died away. The wind rose stronger; the smoke-cloud was broken; the last flicker of living flame sank; the sparks were blown hither and thither in the fitful gusts. The fire was extinct. The azure overhead was again visible through its film of brown haze. He could see once more the radiant green of the apple orchards, and the high hedges, studded with white blossoming elders, and the roofs of the hamlet, and the square church tower. The fire and smoke-storm were over and gone, leaving nothing behind

them but the ash-strewn sods, the blackened tree stems, and the charred branches, where only that morning birds had nested and leaves had worn their birthday livery of youngest spring.

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In the old hall of the ruined castle an old woman sat spinning; the hum of her wheel was the only audible token of human life in all that deserted dwelling. From time to time the spinner paused to adjust the flax or to moisten the fraying thread, but presently, as the afternoon hours waned, the wheel was silent, and the woman sat motionless, listening to the silence. The fire on the hearth was dead, the chill of the spring was keen as winter.

No song of thrush nor the shriller call of blackbirds penetrated the massive fabric of decaying stonework; even at noonday the sunlight could scarcely pierce through the deep-set windows.

A step crossed the court without; the wide oak door was opened, and Crispin stood on the threshold, a slight dark figure of a youth, against a background of rose-streaked sunset. The woman rose and set his evening meal

upon the table, and he bent and kissed the wrinkled hand. She had rocked his cradle, tended his motherless childhood, watched his goings and comings. He was her foster child, and she, to him, was all he had.

Presently he came and knelt at her feet. She laid her fingers on his hair, and peered into his face; his eyes were gleaming as sword points in the dark.

‘At dawn I must bid thee farewell,’ he said.

‘I knew it,’ she answered, and was silent.

‘I heard voices,’ he continued. ‘They came from the land which lies within the smoke. That land I must seek.’

‘Go — for go thou must,’ she replied, ‘nor need we, I or thou, strive with destiny. Listen,’ she went on slowly. ‘In that land thou wert born. In fire was thy first breath breathed, it was thy birthplace; the blood of thy mother, who died in the flames thy father’s slayers had kindled, runs in thy veins. Born in the fire, through it, thy home-land, thou must pass once more. Be as the flame that rises, not as the ash that falls.’

‘I will return,’ Crispin said.

‘Haply,’ she answered mournfully. ‘But

life's river runs on, the water which flows past to-morrow will not be as the water which washes our feet to-day.'

She laid her hands on him and blessed him.

'Thou goest upon thy quest with empty hands,' she said, — 'a knight without weapons, a pilgrim without staff. Yet in the hour of peril three things shall avail: the music of the stringless harp; the stroke of the bladeless sword; the wine of the empty cup.'

'I will remember,' he answered.

And bending she kissed him, and they bade each to the other farewell.

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The spring was over and summer was come.

Crispin rested by the roadside, a homeless wanderer in a strange land. Around him stretched a high plain of purple heather, but the sun was obscured, and the purple was as blackness beneath the heavy thunder-clouds. A pool of dark stagnant water edged with rust-colored mosses and brown flowering reeds, lay close to the track; from moment to moment its ebony surface whitened in the vibrations of the lightning which throbbed across the skies.

Crispin watched it.

‘The brightness of the fire is here,’ he murmured, ‘but where is the grayness of the smoke?’

‘Who are you that choose the rain-cloud for shelter and the lightning flash for the hearth of your home?’ cried a voice beside him.

A horse and a rider were there. The horse was white and the rider was cased in shining silver mail. They looked as though they were hewn in pale marble against the sombre purple of sky and moor. The rider was a youth; his eyes were clear and blue and his tones ringing and gay.

Crispin rose to his feet; hunger and exhaustion had made him haggard as any way-worn beggar.

‘I am a crazy pilgrim,’ he said; ‘I seek a country that is at my very hand and is yet beyond my furthest reach. I hear voices that have no sound. I see forms that are invisible.’

The fair-haired rider laughed merrily.

‘Come with me, mad pilgrim. I know no such country, hear no such voices, see no such forms. But come with me, for to know one’s madness is true sanity!’

‘You do not understand.’ Crispin’s smoke-

dark eyes met those eyes of transparent blue and the young rider recoiled at their keenness. 'You do not understand,' he repeated.

'What do I not understand?' the gay lips stammered. 'Whence come you, whither go you?'

'I come from no home — I have no goal; on earth, with its air and its water, its green growths and changing seasons, I am a foreigner and an alien,' he broke off.

'And I — I am a king,' his companion made answer. 'I will give you, O ragged wayfarer, a home and a country. Come.'

'I will not,' Crispin said. 'To receive is to owe. I will take, or I will do without, all the good things life desires.'

Even as he spoke the storm burst with new fury, the horse reared as one forked flame seemed to spring upwards from a furze bush near, and another slanted earthwards down the trunk of a solitary thorn-tree. The young king's face grew pale, the slight figure swayed; Crispin caught the chain of the steel bit and upheld the rider with his arm.

Then he swung himself from the ground. 'Your horse must carry double,' he laughed; 'where lies your home?'

But the king had fainted and lay mute on Crispin's breast.

Crispin threw the reins on the horse's neck and struck him with the cord which bound his own ragged cloak; and over heath and swamp the white horse plunged, and still Crispin urged him on till the moor was behind and the storm was spent and the walls of a royal city gleamed in the sun. The sentinels at the gate gazed astonished, lowering their weapons, as up to the very door of the great palace, flecked with foam and drenched with the heavy drops of the straight falling rain, the horse bore his double burden. There, by the great basin of the courtyard fountain, Crispin, erect as a bronze statue, awaited what should befall.

'The queen, the queen,' a cry of many voices rose, a vast banner was lifted against the wind, men and women thronged around, clamorous and questioning.

'She swooned upon the moor, I brought her hither,' he said, his eyes resting with a half-veiled smile upon those delicate features, the half-closed lips, the fringed eyelids, and the yellow hair, as he laid the boy-queen in her women's arms.

An hour had passed. In a wide chamber, marble paved, and many windowed, where great burnished shields glimmered upon the bare walls, and pennons, some frayed and tarnished and war-stained, some freshly wrought with glittering fringes and sparkling gems, hung from the carved roof, the queen sat upon the high stone seat, the throne of that royal race of which she alone was left to bear the crown and yield the sceptre. The linked mail no longer covered her white dress; the steel casque no longer hid her soft brows. A girl, tall and slim and royal, she beckoned Crispin to her side.

‘I am King Julian,’ she said, a flicker of laughter rippling in her voice. ‘My people would not have a woman to reign over them nor suffer a stranger to usurp the throne of my forefathers. So they have crowned me king. I ride with my warriors to battle, I hunt with my knights in the woodlands, I sit with my councillors in the hall and judge my subjects in the market-place. Here only, in my marble chamber, I am not king, but queen.’

She stood beside him on the raised step of her throne; she was as tall as he.

‘I have sent for you,’ she went on, and once more her voice was grave, and in the uncertain light of the single lamp, which like a white moon hung suspended above her, it seemed to him that her eyes darkened, ‘have sent for you, my mad pilgrim, to bid you cast aside the phantasm that deludes you. I offer you no gift—a gift you will not receive, and a prize no man shall wrest from my hands. But I proffer you a high service amongst my true-hearted knights, and for reward my praise. Accept or refuse. Go on your way, unhonored, or remain, my trusted guest, a loyal friend, a faithful servant to King Julian.’

Crispin smiled to himself.

‘My lord the King, I accept,’ he said. The girl’s laughter broke forth.

‘The king’s servant! but to the queen what homage?’

He kissed her hands, but he answered her no word.

‘Is it well for a woman to be a king?’ she murmured to herself, as Crispin quitted her presence.

Well and faithfully Crispin served her. In the forest none excelled him in woodcraft, in

battle he bore her standard ever foremost in the fray, yet no man called him friend. He was so dark and pale and silent. So eager for the strife, yet so negligent of the victory; so fierce in the contest, yet so regardless of the prize. And in the winter he would sit alone beside the great hall-hearth, and gaze into the flames with sullen ravenous eyes.

‘Where is the gate?’ he would mutter.
‘Where is the gate?’

‘He is mad,’ his companions said.

But Julian understood, and her laughter died and the blue heaven of her eyes clouded.

‘Forget,’ she cried upbraidingly.

‘My king,’ he replied, ‘remember.’

Yet when the winter was over he seemed as though he had indeed forgotten. In those summer days King Julian held her court under the forest trees, her banquet-hall was the sheep-cropped turf of green slopes. And Crispin’s brow grew smooth and the gloom of his eyes gave place to a clearer light.

It was afternoon. The sun sank westwards; beneath the interlaced beech-boughs twilight reigned, their metal gray trunks, mottled as with great silver scales, bounded the forest

track. Wandering apart from a gay band of companions, Crispin entered the dusky woodland world. Beyond the beeches was a grove of giant fir-trees, their bark glowed red in the sunset, the ground was netted with their claw-like roots, and carpeted with brown pine-needles. In the midst of a small clearing was a charcoal pit with its enclosing circle of blackened ground. A small cloud of smoke hovered over its smouldering ashes, a spectral column in the evening light. From the hut the charcoal-burner crept forth, an old bent wizened man. He passed Crispin with hasty, shuffling steps, and he cast a sideways glance behind him.

‘Good luck to your hunting,’ he muttered, with a half-stifled laugh, and then the quavering notes of his sing-song chant died away as the crooked figure was lost to sight between the fir-tree stems.

‘Good luck to the hunter, good luck to the hound;
Good luck to the quarry — that cannot be found.’

He was gone. But the smoke of the pit rose and rose. The smell of the burning wood was like a spell. Crispin heard the night insects

winging their way through the air; a breeze sighed overhead, lost its way, and sank to rest. There was a silence.

It was night. And in the night the smoke still rose.

‘Crispin, Crispin, when are you coming in?’ jeered the remembered voice.

And in the smoke was the phantasm of a gateway. Then the phantasm was gone. The crescent of a white-gold moon crept over the trees; before him was nothing but the scorched grass, the gray ashes, and the blackened ground. It was but an illusion of the night.

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‘I will come back!’ Crispin said. They stood alone together, he and King Julian. Her white horse browsed in the green forest glade, a trickling stream ran through the grass at her feet, two long-limbed wolf hounds lay near by.

‘I go; but I have kept my promise. I have served my king faithfully,’ he went on, and his eyes were full of unrest.

‘Thou hast served thy king faithfully,’ she answered him slowly. ‘But for thy queen?’

She paused. A smile, half glad, half wistful, dwelt in her blue eyes.

‘ Ah, Crispin,’ she cried softly, ‘ it is the queen who bids thee stay! Choose!’

She held her hand outstretched to his hand.

‘ Does the falcon choose if it will strike the prey? Does the river choose if its current shall run back?’ he asked.

She spoke no other word of entreaty.

‘ Farewell,’ she said.

‘ I will return,’ he reiterated urgently.

‘ So does the spring,’ she answered sadly; ‘ but never twice does it find the selfsame earth.’

That day King Julian rode homeward from the forest alone.

Once more Crispin was a wanderer, a searcher whose quest ever eluded discovery. The winter came, and the spring came also. The summer passed, and the harvest ripened and was gathered in, and the autumn moon rose nightly in splendor of orange-gold amongst its pale cloud-fleeces. But Crispin cared for none of these things while the country of his dream was hidden from him. He passed through orchards, with their fruits of rose-

color and yellow; through valleys of barley and maize; through hillside vineyards, gay with the grape-gatherer's song. To the land he sought he found no road. He fled from field and township, and traversed a new world — a desert of sand and coarse sea-grass, wind-blown, sterile, and frostburnt. Low hillocks outlined the horizon on every side. Upon the sands the winds had left their handwriting, here in ripples and furrows and ridges, there in scooped scallop-shell patterns. On rising slopes they had swept smooth tablets; in mimic valleys they had plied tiny pyramids. The forms into which they had fashioned the running grains were multitudinous, but the hues were everywhere alike, and over the tintless, dun-colored expanse the shadows ran riot. Shadows of clouds, shadows of huge, solitary, wide-winged birds, shadows that seemed to come from nowhere and that went no whither, passed by him continually, scouring the desert like armed bands. It was a land of movement without growth; it was a land without birth and without dying.

‘I will go no further,’ he cried, casting himself upon the ground. ‘I journey, yet am I no

nearer the goal. I press on, yet am I no further from the starting-point.'

The chill of the air pierced his tatters. All around was the white sunlight of a frozen noon. No vapor obscured a single outline of the barren waste. He looked again. One small spiral thread of twisting smoke rose from the base of a circular mound some few paces from where he lay. He moved towards it stealthily.

Beside a fire, kindled from the broken spokes of a wagon wheel, a woman's figure crouched, shrouded and formless, under a dark mantle. She did not lift her head nor turn at his approach. He seated himself on the other side of the meagre pile of dying embers, and held his starved hands to the feeble heat.

'I will rest a while, and then I will go back,' he murmured to himself.

Beneath her veil the woman seemed as if she laughed.

'How will you go back when there is no road back?'

He thought she spoke to him, but her voice sounded as if it were far away, and her head was bowed as if she slept.

'There is no road on,' he cried.

He sprang to his feet. He would have laid his hand upon her to awaken her, but before his arm could touch the slumberer she too had arisen. Her hands covered his eyes, her fingers pressed down his eyelids. They burnt like heated iron.

‘How can you find the road to the land you seek when you are already there? How find the door when you have already entered in?’ she said.

She released his eyes from her imprisoning touch. The sand-waste was gone. He was within the country of his pilgrimage!

Instead of the desert was a steel-paved street. The night sky shone above, luminous as day. In that moonless and starless light he could discern every battlemented wall, every turreted keep.

At his side the woman still stood, pale as he himself, gray-eyed and strong. She was neither grave nor gay, nor glad, nor sorry; she met his gaze, and the mockery of her laughter stung him to anger.

But, as she led him onwards through the translucent darkness of that place, the memories of green earth, of rain-wet flower and dewy

grass, faded from his mind. She guided him on and on, across a court and under the portal of the entrance into a great hall. The sheen of its walls was like dark silver. They ascended up and up a shallow flight of winding stairs. Upon a broad landing-place they paused. A gallery ran round it; it was open to the outer air on one side, and from a vaulted alcove a wide window, pillared like the arches of a cloister, looked down from the height of the palace battlements. The town lay below, dark yet shining, and beyond the city walls stretched a boundless landscape. The same sharp light which overspread the streets and houses extended to the furthest edge of the horizon.

Crispin gazed down. No tree, nor grassy slope, nor flowing stream was there. Rocks of wonderful glittering colors, jagged pinnacles of sulphur yellows, broken flint-like spires of semi-transparent quartz, peaks of phosphorescent scarlet, slabs of slate-tinted purples, ebony marbles, or reaches of metallic blues, veined with vivid green and tinged with deeper hues of prismatic colors, were scattered over the plain. Nowhere was there any special elevation, nowhere any uplifted ridge; it was a level plain,

but a plain of rocks; a burnt country traversed by one straight roadway, a roadway white with edged flints, extending like a measuring line across that desolate solitude in which color, everywhere triumphant, seemed everywhere petrified.

On that highroad Crispin's eyes were riveted.

'Whither leads it?' he demanded.

'On,' his guide made answer.

'Or back?' he murmured.

Her eyes met his with a challenge.

'No,' she replied.

'Is this country a prison?' he demanded.

'It is what each man makes it,' she jeered.

'You talk in riddles,' he answered sullenly.

She made as if she had not heard.

'No man is a captive who does not touch his bars,' she muttered as if to herself.

They went onward, still ascending, till they entered a stately ante-chamber. Crispin turned to look back. The wall behind, the roof above, the floor beneath, were like sheets of solid metal. No aperture, no window, no door.

'How came we in?' he questioned.

'In this land there is no door behind,' she

scoffed. Then he saw that a curtain hung before them; it swayed and was withdrawn.

Round a feasting table were seated a great company of mailed guests. The blue reflections of armor, the flash of crystal flagons, the strange fires of wines, purple as amethyst, filled the place with quivering lights. At one end of the hall a group of minstrels held each a harp whose strings still throbbed with the music of a suddenly hushed song.

Crispin's guide took a goblet from a youth; she held it towards him.

'Drink,' she bade. 'Pledge these, thy brethren, thou art of our blood-royal.'

He lifted the rim to his lips.

A slender boy, a new-comer like himself, his eyes already darkening into the cold languor of his comrade's age, stood near at hand. Beneath his travel-soiled cloak, tangled in the frayed edge of his vest, was a trefoil leaf, a tiny spot of living, fading verdure. Crispin's hand sank. Suddenly before him came the vision of a wide common where clover flowered and grass-blades grew tall. The memory of his foster-mother stole into his heart, and a flush of tender affection tinged his pallid face.

‘I will return to her,’ his heart cried. ‘I will go back.’

A derisive laugh greeted his thought.

‘Find strength for the way,’ the feasters cried.

‘My strength is here.’ Crispin caught the cup in both hands and poured the wine upon the ground. The wine of the empty cup! He drank with fainting lips from the vacant chalice. A thrill of new strength pulsed in his veins as the cup fell clattering, shattered on the marble table. A shout of sullen menace rose on every side. The pool of red wine streamed in tiny rills upon the pavement; it shaped itself like the fingers of a long hand, and one finger was extended as if pointing out a path. Crispin took a step that way. It was but one step, for a hundred arms were stretched before him barring his path; bright swords gleamed out from jewelled sheaths, the heads of spears and of deadly battle-axes threatened the bold guest on every side.

And Crispin was but one to a multitude; he was unarmed amid a swarm of harnessed enemies.

He looked on the right hand and on the left.

‘Yield, yield,’ the woman said, leaning with a cold smile from her high seat. ‘You cannot fly; you have no weapon wherewith to smite.’

‘I will not yield,’ he answered.

Against the wall a suit of rusted armor hung, a blunted spear, a reft helmet, a bladeless sword-hilt. Crispin grasped it and struck on either side. The din of clashing arms arose, but at the strokes of that bladeless weapon the steel of the swords was dented and the spear-heads were broken.

The woman lifted her arm above the tumult.

‘Hold,’ she said. ‘Crispin, thou hast prevailed. To thy backward feet the door shall be unbarred, the road made open; but, for knight-hood’s courtesy, haste not from us till the feast is over and the minstrel’s song is sung.’

And Crispin would not gainsay her request.

He seated himself at her right hand. Ranged in due order, each minstrel took his harp, and each in turn struck the strings till they vibrated into melody, and each in turn sang the praise of that wild country of rocks and metals; and the music throbbed strangely in Crispin’s brain, it beat against the metal walls with notes which were like the rushing of wings; and when the

first song was ended the sword-hilt had slipped from Crispin's grasp, and when the second song was done a spell lay upon his eyes.

‘ We are fashioned of fire, of fire,
And our hearts of flame ! ’

sang the revellers' chorus, filling the pauses of the minstrel's silence, and the flame of which they were fashioned seemed kindled in Crispin's veins.

The woman from the high seat leant towards him.

‘ Sing thou, also,’ she bade him; and at a signal one of the harpers brought a harp and set it beside Crispin's seat.

He looked on it questioningly.

‘ It is of strange workmanship,’ he said. The woman laughed.

‘ Strike its strings and they will answer thee,’ she said.

The youth in whose vest the trefoil leaf had clung stood close to Crispin. Round his neck was slung a small harp, shaped as were those of Crispin's home-country; its disused strings were frayed and shattered, even its framework was defaced and worm-eaten, yet at the sight Crispin started.

‘The stringless harp!’ his foster-mother’s warning woke dimly in his memory.

He drew the instrument from the boy.

‘The music of this harp alone will come at my call,’ he murmured dreamily.

Even as his fingers touched it the instrument seemed stirred into life. A whisper came from its rent cords, a whisper shrill and sweet, which thrilled Crispin’s ears, and the whisper grew into a melody; and in the melody was the sound of the breeze in the forest boughs, and the murmur of woodland rills and hillside streamlets, and the splash of shivering fountains; and the notes of linnet and thrush were in the music, and the long trill of nightingales as they sing in summer gardens and in the morning twilight of fruit-laden apple orchards. All the fair sounds of earth’s fairest places were in that wordless song, — April’s freshness, May’s mirth, and the long peace of the summer-green lands.

‘I will go back — I will go back,’ Crispin murmured. His head sank upon the instrument; he held it to his breast, his heart beat with the pulse of its music, a mist filled the hall, and the sound of lamentation.

‘ We would go back! We would go back! ’
voice after voice took up the wailing cry, ‘ but
for us there is no road — no gate. ’

The wail died away. Crispin slept.

.
When he wakened it was morning. Before
his tired eyes was the wide common of his
youth, fragrant with blossoming gorse; the
little wild-flowers bloomed in the thickets; the
orchards were in their first leaf.

In the churchyard an old woman lay beneath
a grass-grown mound. The hearth of the
ruined castle had long since been cold; the
flax lay tangled on the floor, and the dust
lay gray upon the spinning-wheel.

And far away in a distant land the joy-
bells were ringing for the coronation of a new
king. King Julian was dead.

Crispin had come back, but the world had
passed on.

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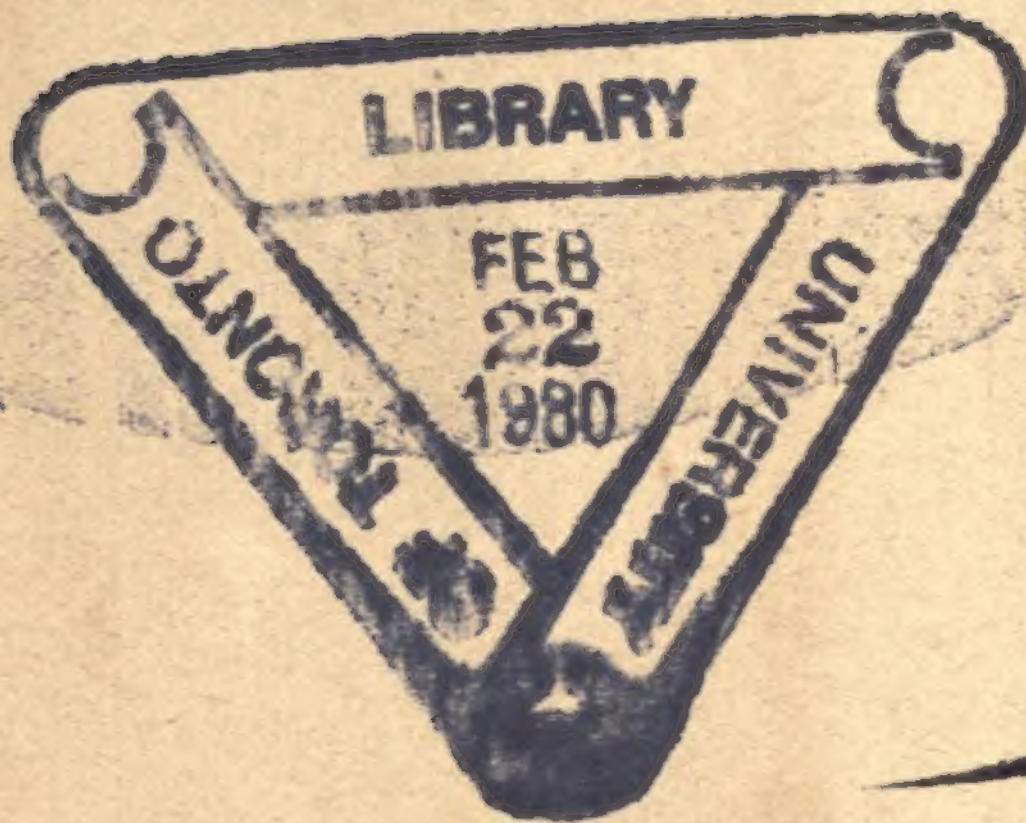
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